

# Married to the Business

Three couples share the techniques they've learned for making their companies and their marriages work together

For many married couples, the idea of working together is both practical and romantic. Like marriage, they see working together as a balancing act, an opportunity to share one another's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses.

Others may find it hard to understand why anyone would want to work with a spouse. Life puts enough stress on marriage without the added burdens of running a business.

Regardless of the pitfalls, couple-owned businesses are here to stay and, according to the Small Business Administration, are on the rise. This is so particularly in building and remodeling firms, about 75% of which are family owned and operated.

More and more of the couples working together these days are equal partnerships. In other words, the stereotype of the wife doing the books part-time for no pay while the husband handles production and sales just isn't accurate anymore. Instead, both partners share almost all aspects of the business, from coordinating the subs to signing the pay checks; from taking the heat for a job gone wrong to sharing in the glory of an award-winning project.

All three of the couples we interviewed have developed their own techniques for managing their work and their marriage, and keeping one from consuming the other. They range from simple things, like not getting the office mail on Saturdays (to avoid looking at all those bills), to complicated systems for dividing duties. But a few things remain consistent among all three couples share a few basic principles:

- The marriage, not the business, must come first.
- To make the relationship work, both spouses must share the same business ethics and the same goals.
- The traditional boundaries between office and home no longer exist, no matter what rules the couples set for themselves. Business and personal matters are hopelessly tangled.

— JLC



Jeanie and Ron Morrisette were both fed up with working for large companies and for people with whom they had philosophical differences. They considered several other businesses but settled on construction since their neighbors were always asking them for advice on remodeling projects. Homestead Construction is a now \$900,000 residential remodeling firm operating out of an office adjacent to the Morrisette's home in Annandale, Va.

## Separating Work and Family

For all three couples, the battle to separate work and family life is unrelenting. To keep one from consuming the other, most have set up some kind of system for delineating business and home.

**Dana Jurak:** "Our best decision about work versus privacy was to move the business into an office outside our home. People used to visit us for business reasons all the time. We'd greet the subs in our kitchen at 6 a.m. and meet with clients in our living room at 8 p.m. Consequently, we had to leave home to escape the business. Now it feels good to get home, put on shorts and a T-shirt, and not worry. It's also nice to take a day off, something that's impossible when everyone's working in the next room."

**Jeanie Morrisette:** Probably the only time we don't talk business is when we're on vacation. And even then it creeps into conversations. Our coping strategy is to go away together, at least once every three months. This puts us back in touch with Jeanie and Ron, as opposed to Mr. and Mrs. Homestead Construction."

**Ron Morrisette:** "Because we work at home, we are both involved in raising our children. That's given me time with my children I might not have had otherwise. But it's also meant the business is an integral part of our children's lives. They've been working with us since they were little — by the time they could alphabetize, we had them filing. I don't know

whether they will, but one day I'd like to see my children become part of our company, to help us make the business grow."

**Lynn Latson:** "Our children are as much a part of the business as we are. They're often on job sites or out visiting clients with us. We try to incorporate some fun into our work time by, for instance, stopping for an ice cream cone on the way to a client's home or visiting a museum near a job site. Sometimes, just seeing all the machinery and the tools can be an adventure for them.

"They really don't know anything other than Mom and Dad being in business. They answer the phone like personal secretaries and often meet our clients. As we see it, our kids are growing up in the real world of business and, as a result, they're exposed to so much more than other children. They understand what's going on in the world, how the world works."

## Deciding Who Does What

Marriages evolve and businesses evolve. Skills change, as do preferences for who would like to do what. That's one of the beauties of working with your spouse: Unlike corporate positions that come with pat job descriptions, you're free to divide duties any way you want.

**Ed Latson:** "The money is my thing. Sales is mutual. As for hiring and firing, whoever hires then fires. Lynn designs, I build. But it hasn't always been this way. It's part growth and part realizing that you are good at



In 1980, with an old Dodge Dart, a small mortgage, and a strong desire to be his own boss, Ed Latson started his building and remodeling business. Lynn joined a year later to take on the kitchen design/build end of the business. Today, Latson and Latson has grown to a \$400,000 firm specializing in commercial and residential restoration, remodeling, and kitchen design. The company has two offices, one in the couple's home and one in Williamstown, Mass.

one thing and not another. There are days when I'm off and she's on. At those times it's nice to know that someone is there to pick up the slack."

**Lynn Latson:** "Back when we started our business, we were constantly looking over each other's shoulders. That caused a great deal of criticism and resentment. It also meant each of us spent a lot of extra hours on the job double-checking the other's work."

"A combination of things finally resolved this for us. Several years ago I had some personal problems that were demanding a lot of my time, so I had to become more efficient. That meant just doing what I did best and leaving the rest to Ed. Much to my surprise, Ed did just fine without me watching over him. Likewise, Ed was so busy trying to keep up, he didn't have time to check my work. In the process we learned we could trust each other."

**Jeanie Morrisette:** "Through the years our duties have changed many times. Ron came into the business with construction experience. I came with management and personnel knowledge. But we didn't stick with these roles. For example, I went back to school and learned to design. So I picked up all the design work from Ron."

"Now I'm capable of producing all my own work, just as Ron can handle the administrative end. To prove the point, last year we each sold and

produced our own jobs from start to finish. In essence, we were co-existing business partners but we shared little. While this arrangement evolved out of anger, we wound up with a new appreciation of each other's talents. Ultimately, it seemed a waste for both of us to be such generalists when we could be specialists. So we're back to working together with Ron handling production and me handling design and administration."

We both receive salaries and we alternate the role of president. For several years we both received equal pay. But when we saw how much FICA we were paying, we changed our system. Now, the one who is president receives a much higher salary. By alternating each year, we are able to meet Social Security requirements, as well as ego requirements."

**Dana Jurak:** "We've found it works best to separate our duties, to do what we do best without any overlap. We work independently and have definite roles and responsibilities. I'm president and he's vice president, but that doesn't mean a hell of a lot. Neither one of us dominates the direction of the company and we both get the same salary."

"Scott is in charge of production and also does the estimating. I work with design, accounting, computers, marketing, and administrative tasks. We always go on sales calls together, although Scott handles customer relations once the job gets underway.

We've found that working sales together is a real plus. Often one of us has more success than the other—some people relate better to a man than to a woman, for instance. That's okay. As long as we get the job, we don't care who they like better."

### Settling Disputes

It's not hard to understand how personal disagreements can spill over into business disputes. It's hard to talk rationally to someone about finding a new paint contractor or how much money's left in the company account when all you'd really like to do is throw a frying pan at them.

**Ed Latson:** "In a sense our employees are often caught in the middle of things. When we do have an argument they seem to know it and sort of creep around us quietly, trying not to get things riled up again. But most of them have been with us for a long time and understand the way we work."

ments turn into personal arguments and vice versa. You can't tell your husband to get lost and then have him like you after work. The overriding factor here is that we have a shared economic and personal incentive to work it out. So we keep pounding at it until we do."

### Free Advice

If they had it to do over, all three of the couples agreed they would go into business together again. But they might do some things differently.

**Jeanie Morrisette:** "We would never advise another couple to do it. It's too hard. There are too many problems to work out."

**Lynn Latson:** "Working together has had a tremendous effect on our marriage. We are much more aware of all the stresses and pressures affecting each other. This has helped us to confront issues in our relationship that might otherwise have been



Dana and Scott Jurak were married in April of 1984. By the end of the month, they were at work on their first house. Today, Jurak Homes is a \$2 million remodeling and new construction company in Plano, Texas. While Scott had been a builder for years, Dana had worked for a major oil company and brought the necessary business skills to the company.

**Dana Jurak:** "Like most couples, 99% of our arguments are completely ridiculous. I think both of us realize that and so we don't let them get in the way of our work."

**Jeanie Morrisette:** "We're basically opposites. I'm a dreamer, he's a doer. I like to wait until all the facts are in. He wants to act on a decision immediately. But we look for the humor in things and, of course, humor is in everything, which is why we haven't shot each other."

Sometimes professional disagree-

swept under the rug. Consequently, despite a lot of fighting and arguing in the process, we are brought closer all the time."

**Ed Latson:** "I never expected to go into business with my wife. For awhile it was hard — I didn't expect her to be as good as she is and my ego has taken a beating as a result. I went into it thinking small and she went into it thinking big. But now that we've sorted things out and I can look back, I realize what it's done for me and for us." ■