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How Not to Kill Your Spouse at Work: Five Strategies for Making It Work as a Married-Business Couple

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Anyone that has entered into a business arrangement with their partner knows, you will more than likely butt heads. There are pros and cons to owning a business with your spouse, but for those of you who are already committed to taking the plunge, here are **5 strategies** for making it work as a married-business couple:

1. Align your business and financial goals.

Before joining *The Orangeblowfish*, I said to my husband, if we do this together, *we’re going to conquer the world*. We both knew what I meant metaphorically, but we didn’t quantify or set goals for this. At the end of our first year of working together, we didn’t have a benchmark to measure success and gaps.

Since then, we’ve put in regular weekly **Strategy Sessions**, where we look at financials, growth strategies, challenges in the business and where we can leverage each other’s strengths.

2. Delegate and learn to say no.

My husband's philosophy in life is to "Yes" to everything, because you never know what the opportunity it may bring you. My philosophy on the other hand, is to say "no" to opportunities that may deter me from my achieving my business and personal goals.

When my father fell ill in May 2019, and unexpectedly passed away within 10 days, I was left in a pretty bad emotional state. I had said "yes" to a lot of things – work and personally – but I was unable to function in any capacity. My friend said to me, "you need time to grieve, Nat". I wanted to return to my "normal state" immediately, but realized that I needed 3-4 months to grieve, and to find myself again. As a result, I restructured our business resources so we would have a high performing team focusing only on key business priorities.

As an entrepreneur, it's hard to let go of control, and even harder not to be a perfectionist. Learn to assess which tasks you should or need to take on yourself, and which ones you can delegate. This way you'll be working **on** the business, instead of **in** the business.

3. Be committed and trust each other.

As managing partner of the agency, I am responsible for taking calculated risks to grow our business into other regions. My mandate is to expand our business footprint into Southern China and Asia-Pacific. By serendipity, I was introduced to a contact based in Guangzhou and after two telephone conversations, I hired her to lead our business development efforts in South China. My husband was quite surprised that I hired our colleague, without interviewing her in person. However, he said to me, "I trust you".

If I were to sit here and tell you that I haven't thought about throwing in the towel, I'd be lying. This is one of the hardest jobs, apart from being a mother, I've ever had. But it does get easier. If you both are **committed** to making this work, **it will work**.

4. Don't take things personally.

I'm not one to take work matters personally. Whenever I have a disagreement with a co-worker, it was always about the business issue at hand, and not about the person. However, it was different with my husband. I found it quite difficult to separate work from family and for obvious reasons I was very short-fused over work disagreements. The reality was that I was frustrated over something that happened at home and the disagreement at work took tensions to a higher level. In our second year of working together, I hired an executive coach to help me learn how to separate my personal-self from my work-self. From the coaching sessions, I learned to use language that allowed me to remove the "personal sensitivities" in work disagreements.

For example, if I was acting as my **personal self**, I would say something along the lines of, "*I don't understand. What are you trying to say?*"

In work situations, I now say, "*I think I'm missing something. Please help me to understand ...*", or "*We're coming at it from different angles. I think what you're trying to say is ...*"

See and feel the difference?

5. “Me Time” – 20 minutes Every Day.

As a women entrepreneur and a mother of two, I have found that women naturally take on more tasks than we care and want to. It's just the reality of things. We try to do everything, even though we know there's only 24 hours in a day. We sacrifice ourselves to do what needs to be done. As a result, I found myself constantly at the mercy of others – whether it be my kids, my business about a year ago, I started dedicating 20 minutes of “**me time**” in the mornings. After getting the kids off to school, and before I get ready for work, my “**me time**” could be a mix of planning my day, a high intensity workout, Asana Yoga or reading the news. I have found by doing this, it prepares my state of mind for the day ahead.

Choose an activity that will for you – a stroll, a run, meditation or something else that will give you a break away from everything and everyone. Find a time that works for you, and commit to it for 10 days straight, 20 minutes every day.

You will honestly feel and see the difference after 10 days.

It's Not One-Size Fits All

There is no right formula when it comes to managing your business relationship with your spouse. It all boils down to hard work, communication, and dedication. Trust yourself, and trust your spouse. You have each other's back.

About the Author

Natalie Lowe is managing partner of [The Orangeblowfish](#), a creative branding agency with a strong presence in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Natalie has 20 years of experience in delivering effective global marketing and communications programs for Fortune 500 and startups. Natalie is responsible for driving business growth, client services, operational management and staff development. Natalie has been based in China for over ten years and speaks three languages fluently: English, Mandarin and Cantonese.



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ADVICE • INSPIRATION

Running a Successful Business with Your Spouse: Top 3 Pros and Cons

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So, let me guess: you want to start a business with your husband. Seems like the most logical choice and perfect situation, right? After all, your husband is your best friend; understands you inside-out; knows your strengths and weaknesses; and you both have the same family and financial goals. What could go *possibly* wrong?

To put things into perspective, my husband and I have been married for nine years, and working together for almost 5 years. My husband is the founder and creative director agency of our creative branding agency, *The Orangeblowfish*, and I'm the managing partner of the firm. My husband started the agency in Shanghai, China, in 2012, while I was still in the corporate world. In 2014, I started my own consulting firm and within a year, my husband and I merged our services under *The Orangeblowfish*.

Fast forward to 2019, I am ecstatic to say that my husband and I are still happily married and running our creative agency together. However, it didn't come easy! The first two years was really challenging in all aspects: emotionally, physically

and financially. While we have different working styles and perspectives on a range of business matters, one thing we do have in common – which is why we’re still together – is that ***our marriage and family will always come first.*** Once we agreed that our role as “life partners” was more important than our roles as business partners, we worked hard on bringing back the “spark” in our marriage, and worked even harder on our business partnership. Every day.

There are many pros and cons to being married business partners. My ***top 3 pros*** are:

- **We set flexible working hours and conditions** – I often need to do school pick up, or run family errands, so I find myself in the office earlier, or starting work from home at 7:45 am, and finishing up earlier.
- **We only work with clients and projects we are passionate about** – In the first two years of starting our business, we said yes to every business lead that came our way. What we found was that we took on projects that didn’t match our interest or skill set and completing the project just wasn’t fun. We went back to the drawing board to realign ourselves with clients and projects we were genuinely interested in, and would take our business to the next level.
- **We have a deeper understanding and appreciation towards each other** – Since working together, we’ve learned to appreciate each other’s unique qualities. My husband and I are complete opposites, and it was hard at first to have someone you are so close to challenge or disagree on almost every decision you make. After time, I came to appreciate that my husband’s brain is wired differently from mine. This has enabled us to tackle business issues from all angles and see all blind spots. Working through our communication issues at work has made us better communicators at work and at home.

Now, here comes my ***top 3 cons***:

- **It’s 24 x 7** – There was honestly a time where my husband and I stopped talking at home because whenever we spoke, it was always about work. As mentioned before, my husband and I are complete opposites so we didn’t (and perhaps still don’t) see eye to eye on a lot of business matters. I have lost count of the number of times we started off with a work conversation over dinner– very casually – and end up with one of us storming off, or giving the other one silent treatment, with our kids at the dinner table.
- **No space or clear boundaries** – Our first office was so small, that I worked at the end of my husband’s desk for about six months before we bought a desk for me. We didn’t have a meeting room or a lunch area, so we were in each other’s face (not space) every day. There were only four of us in the company when I first joined, and we both agreed that we didn’t need a finance or administration executive. I was quite versatile at all the corporate and operational tasks such as drafting and reviewing legal contracts, translating documents, the HR and finances, so I agreed to take care of it temporarily. In reality, this temporary arrangement lasted for two years. All lines were blurred as we just jumped in to make it work.
- **We put all our financial eggs in the same basket** – When my husband first started the agency in 2012, I was still working in a corporate full-time role. In essence, we had a safety net. Now that both of us work full time in the business, if the business doesn’t go according to plan – regardless of macro or micro factors – we can lose it all. This definitely keeps me and my husband up at night more than we’d like to admit.

Integrating your marriage into your business is a whole new ball game.

Obviously, my husband and I jumped into the deep end without carefully

assessing all the risks and challenges. Even though it's working well, in hindsight, I wished I spent time with my husband to discuss the nuts and bolts and devise a plan to address them. Does running a business with your spouse spell doom? Of course not! But it isn't for everyone. Weigh the pros and cons of business co-ownership before you take the leap. Your husband (and colleagues!) will thank you.

Already running a business with your spouse? Check out [“How Not to Kill Your Spouse at Work: Five Strategies for Making It Work as a Married-Business Couple.”](#)

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