

Article 16: Learning to be Partners in Life and Business

My naïveté had me believe that creating a business and working alongside a life partner would somehow make life less complicated. What I have come to realize is that this is not necessarily so! Actually – whilst some aspects become more straightforward, many others become extremely challenging. I am no expert in this, having only recently started out on this path. Even so, what I have learned so far, I am willing to share.

In my experience, starting a business with a partner is a bit like having to do the whole ‘learning to live with each other’ thing all over again; only this time, you are learning to work with each other. In the process, you can discover your partner has a whole new set of motivations, vulnerabilities, behaviours and ways of doing things that you didn’t see before. You may find that what you thought was a shared passion and sense of purpose actually unfolds into some markedly different interpretations and misunderstandings between you.

This isn’t necessarily hugely different to setting up business with a friend or colleague; however because you share a deeper intimacy with a life partner, and will see each other in your most fragile and unguarded moments in life – and so when difficulties arise in the business setting, there is potentially more scope for fears and insecurities to show up more strikingly between you and in public. It is manageable if it is just between you but can be problematic if your personal relationship begins to impact others related to the business.

So – what I have learned is going into business with a partner can be a hugely complex undertaking. In my experience it requires a great deal of personal awareness and mastery in handling these complexities and can be greatly eased by being willing to seek out the support you need to navigate the tough territory.

My current tips to those considering starting out on this path include:

- **Clarity and commitment:** take time to clarify what your business is about (its purpose, mission, vision, values); why it is important to both of you and how you intend to make it work – without some baseline understanding and willingness to face the hard stuff, you will be unlikely to come through the turmoil together.
 - Establish a shared commitment to resolving and learning from your challenges
 - Agree to take personal responsibility for addressing your own ‘stuff’ – and to proactively source support to do it
- **Be aware of Boundaries:** talk about the different ‘containers’ of your personal relationship and the business.
 - Together grow your awareness of what uniquely fits within each container and what exists in both.
 - It helps to make the business a formal legal entity that has strict rules of governance and codes of practice.
 - Remember when you are making business decisions, you must make decisions that are wholly in the interest of the business.
 - You may have ways of interacting with each other in your personal relationship that would not be appropriate in a business setting – so sharpen your awareness about your behaviours and seek feedback on how they impact on others. Decide together about how you will behave, that is supportive of both yourselves and others in the mix
 - It’s easy for work to spill over into the whole of the rest of your life. Pay attention to the balance and make sure you find time to rest, play and do different things together and separately
 - If you have children and other family commitments – these need time and attention too. It may be that you decide one leads in caring for family whilst the other leads the business. Don’t lose sight of valuing the multiple purposes to which you are both committed
 - Remember you are both individuals and are therefore different, with different needs and interests. Stay connected with your individual friends and have time alone to replenish your soul and remember who you are!
- **Maintain differences in your business container:** over the years you could find that you get complacent, stuck in your thinking or that you get caught in a dynamic of not talking about the tough stuff.
 - Early on, before you get set in your ways, consider recruiting other Directors to bring third party balance and diversity of perspective into the business
 - Set up an outer circle of ‘guides’ to act as critical friends/ wise counsel to shake up your thinking and practice
- **Secure support:** grow your trustworthy support networks
 - Enrol Mentors and experts to help with technical, legal and financial advice
 - Seek personal/emotional support for each of you as individuals and, if necessary, as a partnership, to help you navigate the challenges you face. This could be professional coaching/ supervision as well as drawing on friends who are trustworthy enough to tell you the truth when you are being unreasonable!



- **Shared risk – shared benefit:** remember you are both investing in growing something together.
 - Be clear about what each of you is contributing and how benefits will be shared. It is easy for things to get out of balance and to slip into blame/ martyrdom if one person thinks they are carrying the burden of input and/ or responsibility.
 - Agree issues of ownership and remuneration and make sure this is above-board and will stand up to external scrutiny.
- **Role division:** support each other to play to your strengths and get into flow.
 - Find ways to employ others to do the things that neither of you are good at
- **Appreciation and Celebration:**
 - Consciously show your appreciation for and gratitude to each other, for what you each contribute. In intimate relationships it is too easy to lose sight of saying a simple, heart-felt 'thank you'
 - Celebrate successes together and with others who care about you as people and about what you are doing together
- **Have fun:** remember to laugh and enjoy the journey!

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