Working with your spouse

Philip Newsome argues that joint involvement can create more problems than it solves and so advises dentists to avoid mixing work with rocky relationships.

A young graduate recently asked a female dentist what advice she would give him as he entered into general dental practice. She thought for a while and then offered the following pearls of wisdom: ‘Don’t sleep with your nurse and never, ever make your wife your practice manager!’

In my earlier days I worked in a number of practices where the owner’s wife was indeed the practice ‘manager’ and I have to say on most (not all) occasions it didn’t really work. Off the bat I have to avoid accusations of sexism and say that, of course, the situation can be reversed and a female dentist could employ her husband but, in my experience, this is rare.

I can see why couples do it – they get to spend more time together while at the same time investing their combined energies into growing the business. The problem is that, in most cases, joint involvement seems to create more problems than it solves.

Azriela Jaffee – author of Permission to prosper: What working wives crave from their husbands and how to get it – estimates that only about 5% of couples who enter into full partnership businesses succeed. The difficulties appear to lie firstly in the often troubled relationship between staff members and the spouse and, secondly, in the potential for strife between the couple themselves. In the former, the non-dentist spouse is often resented, unfairly perhaps, because he/she is perceived to be there simply because of their relationship with the owner and not on merit. In the latter, working with a spouse is generally not an easy thing to accomplish – even the happiest of couples do not always agree on everything, and this is particularly true when it comes to money and business.

This may have something to do with the often different ways that men and women tend to make business decisions. While men are usually very good at problem solving, they are less likely to compromise or concede to other solutions. Men are more likely to simply look at ‘facts’, and less willing to look at the emotional components that often need to be factored into business decisions. The problem is that such decisions often require an air of impartiality and staff may feel, rightly or wrongly, that the spouse is unlikely to be even-handed simply because he or she is just that, the spouse.

So what advice would I give? Firstly, if your relationship is already rocky, working together is like having a child to try and invigorate it. It does not work and you end up with even more complications and reasons to disagree than before. Equally, if you are already struggling with the business, pulling your spouse in to save the day is not a good idea either. It puts pressure on your partner to solve problems that you could not. If they can solve them, you may even resent them for being successful in something you failed to accomplish. If the problems aren’t solved, you may blame them for a mess that you created in the first place.

If you do decide to work together I think that the chances for success are greatest when you openly acknowledge to staff members that yes, you are a couple, but that in terms of business that goes out of the window and you are working together for the good of the business and that includes the welfare and concerns of staff working in it. The non-dentist spouse must have a clearly defined job role, should ideally be even-handedly appraised along with everyone else (easy to say, difficult to achieve) and will likely have work doubly hard to earn his/her spurs and show that they are there on merit. Sometimes this will mean having to take a stance against the dentist partner and it is for this reason that the relationship must to be strong in the first place in order to withstand these moments of potential conflict.

That said, you also need to be flexible in your ideas and expect to have to compromise more than you would with an unrelated co-worker. Working together requires that you have good communication skills. Communication with one another is the key to being able to be together 24 hours a day. You also need to have respect for one another, and of course, trust. You must treat your spouse with the same (or higher) level of courtesy and respect that you would anyone else you work with.

Achieving all that and then being able to go home and get on with private life together away from the practice makes working together a pretty tall order for most people. On balance I don’t recommend it but when it does work the results can be astonishing. I have seen some remarkable couples achieve amazing things and that, I believe, is real testimony to the strength of their underlying relationship more than anything else.

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