

Illustration by Corey Lewis.

## When your business partner is your spouse

Rena Striegel for *Progressive Forage*

### AT A GLANCE

Many farms and ranches have spouses leading the team; here are four strategies that can help get everyone on the same page while strengthening business and personal relationships.

*A clear vision that takes into consideration not just the growth of the operation but also uncovers where there could be a misalignment around risk tolerance is critical to working together as a unified team.*

Owning and operating a business with a spouse can be one of the most rewarding challenges a couple can undertake. As with everything in life, success leaves clues. Couples who have found success in running a business together develop strategies for creating space for both their relationship as a husband and wife and their relationship as business owners.

Although there are many ways couples can work together to have a healthy relationship both in and out of their business, research has shown many successful couples operating a business together share four strategies:

#### Vision

First, they have a clear and unified vision of what they are working to build or the life they want to have. They have taken the time to articulate their goals to their spouse and have developed a plan that includes both their aspirations. It is never too late to do this exercise. Many couples “think” they know what their partner wants, but many find there is a longstanding dream that is unrealized or there are ideas that could potentially bring added value or profitability to the business. One couple I was working with thought both of them were ready to start working into a retirement plan. When they sat down to talk, they realized both of them wanted to undertake a major expansion.

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#### Clarity

Second, successful couples have clarity about their role and how they will contribute to the vision. They know what they are accountable for and what authority they have to make decisions independently. They also treat their roles within the business as a business relationship. They have meetings to discuss the day-to-day business operation and to make decisions together as a couple (or leadership team if the operation has managers or key people).

Setting a regular meeting schedule helps to keep their roles



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as business leaders separate from their role as husband or wife. The saying, "Leave your personal life at home" can be very difficult in a family run operation. The more you "professionalize" your operation, the easier it is to do. This becomes particularly important when children start to enter the business, or you begin to hire employees. The more clearly everyone understands their roles and the expectations attached to it, the easier it is for people to perform their jobs with minimal supervision.

**Appreciation**

Third, successful couples have appreciation for what their spouse brings to the partnership. Successful spouse teams treat each other as equals and not only embrace their differences but celebrate them. In relationships, it is easy to minimize the contribution of others, but successful couples who work together find ways to elevate the contribution of their spouse.

Many couples struggle when their spouse is seen as "the secretary" or as someone who "runs to get parts," or as the person "who doesn't know what is going on." The more frequently couples can see the value and contributions of their spouse, the better their working relationship

will be. Couples who actively acknowledge strengths in each other tend to solve problems better, deal with stress more effectively and can identify and initiate strategic opportunities more quickly.

**Business-free zones**

Finally, successful couples have "business-free zones" where they don't allow conversations and activities to focus on the business. This can be challenging for many couples because the tendency to put the business in the center of everything has become a habit. For some couples, this is as simple as no "business talk" at the table or at family events. For others, they eliminate "talking shop" right before bed or before they have had coffee in the morning. Taking the time to develop a relationship outside of the business is as important as creating a healthy dynamic in your business.

Couples often feel challenged by beginning conversations like these with their spouse – especially if you have never had conversations like this or created agreements with each other about your business. Often it is easier to have shorter conversations in the beginning. Pick a topic you already do fairly well and expand your mastery of it. It can also help to have a clear outcome

**Setting a regular meeting schedule helps to keep their roles as business leaders separate from their role as husband or wife. The saying, 'Leave your personal life at home' can be very difficult in a family run operation. The more you 'professionalize' your operation, the easier it is to do.**

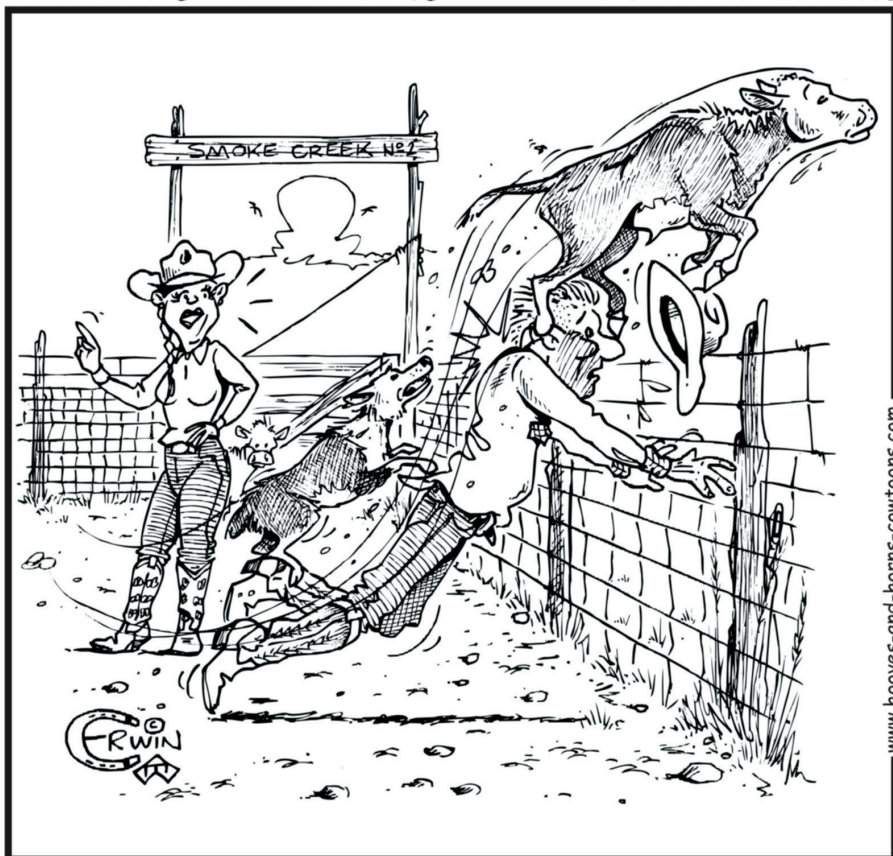
in mind. What do you want to improve? Are you in alignment in these areas? Are there areas where you see things differently and may need to spend time getting on the same page? Are you spending enough time together outside of your business?

As couples begin to create

discipline in these areas, there is often a significant improvement in several key areas: Communication becomes easier and problem-solving improves, stress reduces, the team begins to act in a more cohesive way, and excitement about the future for both your business and relationship will increase. ✍️

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