

The ^{silent} Partner

By Nozer Buchia



The Entrepreneur's Spouse

In this ever-evolving world of uncertainty and constant change, never ever doubt the influence of the Entrepreneur's Spouse – most successful entrepreneurs consider unconditional support from their spouses the single most important factor for their continued success.

Substantial research, extensive analysis, and several personal interviews with successful entrepreneurs and their spouses, has compelled me to conclude that entrepreneurs who come home to criticism and unpleasantness may well abandon their enterprise altogether. It has also led me to the fact that entrepreneurs easily change strategies if it is causing a problem at home.

Let us attempt to understand the role of this very powerful individual who is probably the closest person in the life of an entrepreneur, because a spouse is directly affected by the success or failure of the enterprise. A business partner's role is most often direct and contractual, and, in most cases, is seen and acknowledged. On the other hand, a spouse frequently remains in the background, unstudied and generally unacknowledged.

Is an Entrepreneur's Spouse Really Valued?

Entrepreneurs' spouses live with uncertainty. Most folks married to entrepreneurs, value the role they play in supporting their partners' passion, and would want their spouse to embrace a less

mercenary view of their relationship. A necklace for a missed Christmas dinner, or a week away from home on business when there's a very sick child at home, doesn't always go down very well with a spouse. Be optimistic, positive, and generally not prone to worry; and bingo! – you're the entrepreneurs' version of a rock star.

As Peter F. Drucker has so pertinently said, "Wherever you see a successful businessman, someone once made a courageous decision." And in most cases that courageous decision was either made, or strongly influenced, by the spouse. If they are your significant other, won't their opinion be significant as well? There is often a disagreement about the answer to this question, though my personal feeling and experience is *yes indeed...* as their wisdom will sharpen your business skills at seeing things you might otherwise miss out on. It's just like on Wall Street, where people famously alight from their Rolls Royce to seek advice from people who use the public transit system. A spouse can most often become the motivating and balancing factor in the life of an entrepreneur.

According to Bibby Financial Services, spouses of business owners in the UK spend 230 million unpaid hours each month to help their partners' businesses. The report also shows that the hours worked by entrepreneurs' partners are worth £72 billion every year to the UK economy. Something to think about...

The Entrepreneur's Pre-nup

Entrepreneurs remain positive about investing in people, as most of them are of the belief that people are their greatest asset. Does that include the spouse? And the flip side of this is a question that is not very often asked (as it interferes with the family life and ego of a spouse) – would you ever hire your spouse, either as an independent consultant or an employee in your business?

Life as an entrepreneur is complicated enough to start with, and the added burden of balancing business and family is not something an entrepreneur ever looks forward to... not even when things are going well. To create the business of their dreams, entrepreneurs must learn the ins and outs of an entrepreneurial partnership – survival



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with the spouse while focusing on growing and managing a business. Opening a business is one thing; growing it is another.

When we put two people together, life becomes intricate, problems get knotty, and the solution gets even more challenging. As has been rightly said, "True partnership means becoming comfortable with compromise, but not becoming compromising." Your partnership should be committed towards harmonizing the freedom and vision of your entrepreneurial dreams with the grounded practicality of making a business work together.

And speaking of commitment – when interviewing women entrepreneurs, there was a striking difference. It also resonated with the fact that a woman's instinctive nurturing feeling usually dominates her personality. I observed that in order of priority, women entrepreneurs generally list their spouse first, their close friends second, and their business associates third. Interesting! (Men ... are we listening?).

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the entrepreneurial venture to such an extent, they feel that they are always asked to “accommodate,” with the assurance that things will only get better – the question being when! They believe in their entrepreneur and the business, and are willing to “please” to such a degree that sometimes they just wait for a miracle to happen.

But do they really understand the business and what it takes to be successful? – can they represent their entrepreneur and the business at a social gathering, or are they at times a source of embarrassment?

Let us address and understand my four non-compromise-able prerequisites to being a “silent partner.”

The Balancing Act – Bad feedback and white lies

People like to be nice to people. But unfortunately, when it comes to business, spouses don’t always give the best advice. This is especially true at the birth of a business. Nobody wants to be a buzz-kill. The spouse hesitates to tell the entrepreneur that their idea is bad, or that their planning is not adequate, or anything else negative. Most spouses get conditioned to be supportive regardless of the situation.

They also don’t want to be wrong. Imagine your entrepreneur has an idea that you think is terrible. You share your objections, but he/she goes ahead with the idea anyway, and it succeeds. Now you’ll always be the naysayer that never believed in them. Nobody wants to be that person. And that is exactly why most often you rarely get honest, objective business advice from spouses. And yet, spouses are the first people entrepreneurs turn to for advice.

Confidence vs. Acceptance

Is knowledge and confidence, confused with emotion and acceptance?

A hypothetical situation was created where 10 entrepreneurs and their respective spouses are asked to board an airplane and are told that the flight that they are about to take is the first-ever to feature pilotless technology. Each couple is then told, privately, that their company’s software is running the aircraft’s automatic pilot system. Nine of the entrepreneurs and their respective spouses promptly leave the aircraft, each offering a different type of excuse. One entrepreneur and his spouse alone remain on board the jet, seeming very calm indeed. Asked why they were so confident in this first pilotless flight, the entrepreneur’s spouse replied: “If it’s the same software that is developed by our company’s IT systems department, this plane won’t even take off”!

Determination and Persistence – How much is too much?

I asked a “silent partner” once: “Your entrepreneur has failed twice already – why are you still supporting his business venture? – do you really believe this time he will succeed? Haven’t you had enough already?”

And she replied, with conviction in her voice, “Swimming along the flow is effortless, but swimming against it needs effort. You should not go the way life takes you, but take life the way you want to go.... dare to be determined and persistent. This time, I’ll be helping him succeed!”

Are you IN or OUT of the Business – What is your commitment?

In my opinion and experience, the biggest question of all that an entrepreneur’s spouse needs to answer is – are you in or out of the business? And this is by no means an easy question to answer. But once you’ve decided that you’re “in” the business, it becomes a ball-and-chain that you carry with you for a long time, like it or not. You are then married not only to the entrepreneur, but also to the business.

In my world of entrepreneurship, my spouse is certainly in the business. Although her frustrations are very real and sometimes visible, her unconditional support and caring, the constant concern for my accomplishments and my success, and the worry regarding an adverse effect on my ego, far make up for her dissatisfaction and irritation with the entrepreneurial situation. This being said, she is also my best and worst critic – a role that I encourage her to play for the continued success of the business.

In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, “I think I’ve been asked to do something about everything in the world except change the weather.” These words so aptly describe the feelings of an entrepreneur’s spouse. There are always competing needs, and constant juggling is required so as to prioritize and focus to find a fine balance. Business ownership can cause strain and resentment, spouses say. It’s almost like there’s a third-party in your marriage. Work-life balance is one of an entrepreneur’s biggest concerns; and often it’s up to the spouse to maintain that harmony.

This is how they feel... Our Silent Partners

I consider myself privileged to have been invited into the minds and hearts of our “silent partners.” What I learned has certainly made me think about my own situation much more than I would ever care to admit. One final question that I asked them all –

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“Having gone through the pleasure of being called ‘the silent partner’ and having unconditionally supported your significant other’s entrepreneurship dreams and ventures, if there was just one thing you wanted to tell ‘your entrepreneur,’ what would it be?”

Their feelings, experiences, and choice of words differed based on their circumstances, but one common message was echoed loud and clear (and I paraphrase) – “It is a very difficult and challenging path but indeed a satisfying one. It is also a lonely experience which many will never

be able to relate to – however, it is a journey worth pursuing. My Dear Entrepreneur, it is important to remember that life goes on. While building a business, please don’t put your spouse on hold.” **N**

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