

FIRST COMES LOVE, THEN COMES LAUNCHING A BUSINESS

COFOUNDERS OFTEN JOKE THAT THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS AS COMPLICATED AS A MARRIAGE. THREE COPING TECHNIQUES FOR WHEN YOUR COFOUNDER IS YOUR BETTER HALF. *By Kate Rockwood / Illustration by SHOUT*



Heather and Allan Staker used to have date nights. Then the married couple launched a startup together. “Friday date night would turn into eating Indian food in front of our laptops,” Heather says. “I was starting to feel overwhelmed—we were always together, but we were always working. I went to see a life coach, who told me, ‘You’ve got to stay in love with each other, apart from your business.’” ¶ So they came up with a rule: No computers on date nights. It wasn’t easy, but they stuck to it. And with technology banished, their special dinners became a time to connect and talk as spouses rather than as cofounders. Their online educational program, Brain Chase, could wait.

The benefits of starting a business with a loved one seem obvious: You’re working with a person you trust, and whom you already know you enjoy spending time with. There are plenty of high-profile success stories—Cisco, Eventbrite, Popsugar, ModCloth, and SlideShare were all started by couples—to serve as inspiration for marrying business and love. But even the best partnerships can be strained by the stresses of running a business. Finding dedicated time for a relationship when there are shared work responsibilities to be delegated, staff to be managed, and conflicts to be resolved is no joke. And that’s why when things go wrong, perhaps nobody has it worse than partners who are both in love and in business: The stakes can be so much higher.

“It’s not utopia for everybody,” says Glenn Muske, a professor at North Dakota State University who has tracked the same group of 200 partnered cofounders (or “co-preneurs”) since 1997. “We find that co-preneurs feel they’re more successful, both in business and in their personal lives. But you have to go into it with your eyes wide open.”

START WITH A PLAN

IFor many couples, starting a business together feels natural: The idea likely came out of their own relationship. In the Stakers’ case, Brain Chase began as the duo brainstormed ways to keep their five kids engaged over an upcoming school break. Heather had worked in education and knew that most children regress as much as two months during summer vacation. She suggested creating a Google doc of the best online activities and challenging their kids to complete them. Allan started riffing: What if the Google doc was an app that could stitch together different programs? From there, the ideas flowed: A prize at the end! Get the neighborhood kids involved!

For Father’s Day, Heather gifted Allan three nights of solitude in a hotel room to hammer out the business plan while she took care of the kids. Just after, Brain Chase secured its first investor. The couple raised \$500,000 and took the company live in 2014, and has since had more than 6,000 kids sign up to learn.

But while they shared jointly in the idea, they were aware that they couldn’t share every duty. “From the start, we knew we wanted a division of labor,” says Allan. Heather handled the high-level work

and educational goals of the company, and Allan took on the day-to-day operations.

Daniel Van Der Vliet, executive director at the Smith Family Business Initiative at Cornell University, says this is a critical first step—and not just because it makes the couple more efficient. “Someone has to take the leader role,” he says. “That doesn’t mean they’re more valuable than the other person, but it creates a sense of order and responsibility.” And divvied domains also make it harder to get played against one another. “Employees will quickly figure out who the pushover is and approach that person,” says Muske. “But you should divide the areas of expertise and then avoid stepping into the other person’s side.”

Mariah and Sam Calagione did just that when they launched Dogfish Head Brewings & Eats in Rehobeth Beach, Del., back in 1995: Sam focused 100 percent on getting the brewery off the ground, while Mariah helped run the dining room. They also proceeded within their own comfort zones, which allowed each of them to work on Dogfish Head without regrets. “I’m more risk-averse than Sam, who always wants to go gangbusters,” says Mariah. “For the first two years, I had a job with a steady paycheck and insurance, and I worked at the restaurant on nights and weekends.”

When Mariah finally joined the brewery business full-time, she stepped into marketing with Sam—but the business couldn’t afford a full-time HR or payroll person, so those duties fell to her as well. “She did 10 points better on her math SAT than I did, so her job was accounting,” Sam says. (That’s a joke.) As the company grew, they discovered that sharply defined roles were even more important—not just for their marriage but for their employees as well.

“We didn’t want to create a scenario where none of the employees understand the difference between the two of us,” says Mariah. “Or if they don’t like what Mom has to say, they’ll go ask Dad.”

KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL

2Unlike the Brain Chase and Dogfish Head founders, Heidi Zak and Dave Spector both decided to go all in when they set out to launch the San Francisco-based bra and underwear company

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Mariah and Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DOGFISH HEAD BREWERY

ThirdLove in 2014. “We both had busy jobs before,” says Zak, who left her post at Google to start the company. “ThirdLove wasn’t a week-end project. We gave up some security by both joining full-time, but we wanted to be equally committed and equally in the crazy.”

That commitment meant constant closeness. Keeping in-office interactions more professional than personal isn’t a challenge for Zak and Spector—they’re not the type of schmoopy couple to call each other “babe”—but they’re still mindful of how they communicate at work. “You talk and joke and argue with your significant

other a certain way, because you’re so familiar,” says Zak. “We both have strong opinions, and only one person can win each point when debating. As we’ve grown, we’ve focused more on making sure it stays elevated and professional—in word choice and in tone.”

Because while evidence of marital intimacy might not seem like a big deal, “it can be hard to tell how your romance affects employees or customers or vendors,” says Kathy Marshack, Ph.D., a psychologist and the author of *Entrepreneurial Couples*. “It’s so much easier to be discreet than to deal with someone who’s offended.” Setting up your

environment so it feels more professional—like having a work wardrobe or a coworking space rather than just your couch—can naturally curb some of that cutesy behavior, she says.

Still, Zak and Spector never shy away from drawing attention to their marriage when talking with investors. Recent successes have warmed VCs to the idea of cofounders who balance business and a relationship—some investors even say married cofounders can actually snag more love from venture capitalists. That certainly seems to be true in the case of ThirdLove, which uses advanced image-recognition technology to help women find their ideal undergarments. It launched with \$5.6 million in seed funding and closed an \$8 million Series A round in February. Pretty great for an app that matches women with the perfect bra in the perfect size—just take a picture of your torso.

3 SET EXPECTATIONS EARLY

Before pouring all your coupled energy into a budding business, it’s important to set parameters of where work ends and where life begins. For the Stakers, the no-laptops-on-date-night rule was a romance (and sanity) saver, and it inspired additional at-home rules. “We usually start fighting if we talk about *anything* related to work or money after 9 P.M.,” Heather says. “So we try to shut down the

conversation by then and just pick it up again in the morning.”

For others, the marriage becomes all about the work—and that can be OK, too. An added benefit of married business partners is not being nagged on the weekend or on vacation to unplug, as spouses often do. A cofounder gets how impossible that is—and they’re right there next to you, clicking through emails.

“It’s ridiculous to try to keep your business and your personal life separate,” says Marshack. “And the truth is, if you don’t focus all your energy on your company when you’re starting out, it runs more risk of failing.” But that doesn’t mean a free pass to shelve your personal time, she points out. Go ahead and work together, commute together, take work calls on vacation. But also make plans to do things other than work. Tack a day of vacation onto that conference; schedule an outing. Says Marshack, “Work will come up, but don’t view it as bad.”

And don’t neglect big-picture planning. Van Der Vliet urges coworking couples to imagine where their business—and their relationship—could go in the future. “As difficult as it is, sit down and talk through: What if one of you doesn’t want to do this at some point? What if you make millions and want to sell? What if you don’t? What if one of you dies? What if you run out of money?” he says. “Putting these things in place doesn’t mean it’s going to constrain you. These are situations every business might face sooner or later, whether it’s hypersuccessful or a terrible failure.”

Either way, your co-preneur’s got your back. □