

# **Married to the Business**

## **How to Keep Family Business Spouses From Feeling Left Out in the Cold**

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Family-owned companies are an integral part of today's business world. Currently, 90% of all businesses in the United States are family-owned, with 50% of them employing more than one family member. With so many people living and working together day in and day out, the strain on the familial relationships is almost inevitable. However, aside from those family members who work together on a daily basis, there's another group of people not working in the business who feel the same if not more relationship stress as a result of the family business: the spouses who are outside the business.

Those who are "married to the business," so to speak, face a unique set of challenges many family business members overlook. As family business members "talk shop" at home with each other and use jargon non-business members may be unfamiliar with, their spouses often feel left out of a major part of the family's life. While the in-laws and husband or wife discuss business issues over weekend dinners or at family gatherings, the spouse is often cast aside with nothing meaningful to contribute. In many instances the spouses may even appear ignorant about family business issues, as they haven't been included in the intimate details of how the business operates.

The relationship stress many "business spouses" feel can at times be detrimental for the family ties. For example, suppose your husband works in a family business with his or her parents and brother Bob. For an entire week, your husband comes home every evening complaining of how Bob berated all the employees during a meeting and treated some customers rudely. You then learn that Bob "blew up" at your spouse when confronted about his actions. The more your spouse complains about Bob, the more negative feelings you harbor towards him. At the next family gathering, you see Bob and have trouble being cordial to him. What your spouse may have failed to mention, though, is that on Friday Bob apologized to the staff for his actions and has since returned to his former friendly self. However, because you did not know about Bob's apology, you have a hard time letting go of the negative emotions you're feeling towards him. Thus, your relationship with Bob suffers.

Fortunately, there are steps family business members can take to help spouses feel more connected with the business and the family.

### 1. Conduct a yearly family retreat.

Once a year, devote an extended weekend to a family business retreat. Invite all the family business members and their families to take a relaxing get-away so everyone can interact, discuss family business issues, and forge tighter relationships. During the retreat, schedule one morning of business meetings and the remainder of time for fun family events. Be sure everyone is a part of both. When Cox Industries in South Carolina held their yearly family retreat at the new Balantyne Resort in Charlotte, NC, they did just as recommended. Aside from their business meeting Saturday morning they had beautiful dinners, brunches and a rousing and fun "Goofy Olympic" event getting the family to laugh and play together. After such a fun

weekend together, they went home refocused, revived, and rededicated to the family business and each other.

The non-business members of Cox Industries felt the retreat was the perfect time for them to learn about the business and to see how the various family business members interact with each other on a professional level. The retreat also allowed the children to learn and relate to the family business, as they may be the business' future employees.

It's a good idea to conduct the retreat at a different location each year and if there are young children present, hire a babysitter for the business activity morning so spouses are free to attend.

## 2. Include spouses in family business meetings.

If a family business retreat is not feasible, consider including the spouses in the family business meetings. Doing so will give the spouses another way to understand the business and what issues family business members are presently facing. Spouses need not attend every meeting, but they should be invited to participate in a few every year. Susan Lau, whose husband Jeffrey is a part of his family's industrial loan company, attends the company's annual meeting. There she gets to see the business' figures, forecasts, and plans for the coming year. While she may not understand every aspect of her husband's family's business, going to the meeting makes the business issues seem more real to her. Susan's reaction to attending the meeting is typical of business spouses: Once spouses understand the challenges and dynamics of the business, they are generally more supportive of any business activities. To make these family business meetings more enjoyable for the spouses, be sure the meeting also has a social aspect to it, such as going out to dinner afterwards or spending the evening watching family movies.

## 3. Use your spouse's talents in the business.

If your family business has a need for some occasional business or administrative assistance that a spouse can provide, encourage him or her to take part. One good example of this in action is Steve Cheng, a "business spouse" to his wife's family business, Wing Hing Noodle, located in California. In order to feel a part of the family business, Steve will occasionally come into the office at night or on a weekend to help teach employees a new software application or to fix a computer problem. Although Steve does these activities pro bono, he reaps much more in terms of understanding and connectedness to the business. Doing these small tasks gives him a chance to interact with his in-laws on a professional level, while it also allows the family business members an opportunity to explain the inner workings of the business to him.

## 4. Educate spouses about family business issues.

Despite the family's involvement in the business, many spouses may still be unaware of all the unique issues family businesses face. To give the spouses a broader understanding of family business concerns, encourage the "business spouses" to join the family at specialized family business training sessions offered through universities or family business councils. Most cities offer various family business programs, with courses ranging from succession planning and estate planning to

dealing with stress in the family business. For a list of universities offering family business programs, contact The Family Firm Institute at [www.ffi.org](http://www.ffi.org) or 617-789-4200. Inquire with these organizations as to how you can align your family business with them so your company can obtain additional resources and support.

While it's definitely important to separate family and business whenever possible, the "business spouses" need to feel a connection to the family business so they can understand the business' challenges and offer their support when needed. The harder family business members work to include the spouses, the better the various interpersonal relationships will develop without hanging on to negativity. In the end, the spouses' support will enable the family business to attain new goals and achieve a higher level of success.

## **About the Author**

Laura Michaud, MBA, is a family business expert, author, and President of The Michaud Group. A former third-generation family member for Beltone Electronics, she has helped thousands of family members through various challenges specific to family firms. Her book, *From the Kitchen Table to the Conference Table: Family Business Communication*, shares tools and techniques that are guaranteed to improve your family business relationships. Contact The Michaud Group at 630-835-0333 or [Laura@LauraMichaud.com](mailto:Laura@LauraMichaud.com).

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