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Executives shouldn't take marriage for granted

Find the balance between home and work

BY HARRY S. DENNIS III, for SBT

Making an executive's marriage work ... How about this for a touchy subject? And yet, is any subject more relevant in today's complex and demanding executive management environment?

My thanks this month to Dr. Ken Druck, a The Executive Committee (TEC) speaker and consulting psychologist, for his experience and insights on this subject. Nothing here, quite frankly, is mind-boggling. It's common sense.

But will you have the courage to share this with your spouse? I did with mine. We're going to make some changes as a result.

The irony is that as execs, we bring a tremendous amount of energy and focus to make our businesses reflect our commitment to excellence and perfection. In the process, this can easily translate to energy fatigue in our marriages. However, our partners don't necessarily read it this way.

Let's identify the main culprits central to failed relationships. Let's assume that none of these culprits are the consequences of extra-marital affairs.

- **Boredom.** The work environment is a constantly changing, largely unpredictable, often exciting, situational experience. If it's boring, the exec is, no doubt, in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's unlikely that clipping coupons fits today's executive management culture. If it does, there will be a separation sooner or later. On the home front, boredom has the same pernicious consequences. Something has to give. A boring relationship is doomed to failure.

- **False personality.** These marriages look absolutely perfect to the outside world. The pressure on couples to maintain this false persona is enormous. There are few apparent cracks in the marital armor. But the contrast of the ideal publicly-seen persona with the realities of a sullen internal marriage condition provides a comparison/contrast annoyance (almost black-white) that is hard to ignore. In the business environment, a false persona is easy to detect and easy to extinguish.

- **Distance.** Three symptoms of distance stand out like a sore thumb. One spouse shares an important event in their lives and the other spouse appears uninterested. The second symptom is the non-verbal body language that says "I'm unapproachable." Finally, there is the unavailable symptom. For example, "Honey, I don't have time for that right now. Let's discuss it tomorrow."

- **Psychological wounds.** We have all have had them at one time or another. The problem exacerbates itself when an exec who is wounded at work takes it out on a husband or wife. It might be in the form of verbal abuse, but more commonly it is characterized by chronic brooding, pouting and blaming, in particular.

Certainly, there are other culprits, but Dr. Druck believes these are the major ones. The fact of the matter is that we would probably all agree that there are no asymptomatic relationships. We would also probably concur that communication difficulties are at the top of the mountain when it comes to low per-



formance marital relationships.

High-performance marriages

There are, however, a number of other factors that contribute to high-performance marital relationships. Let's take a look at them, which to me is far more enlightening than focusing on the negative.

1. **Safety.** Let's face it. At work, we aren't always as we hope to appear to be: calm, cool and collected. We maintain a face, a consistent pattern of countenance as we relate to our superiors and subordinates, and peers alike. Marriage is like an interpersonal, enclosed tent. It is private, safe and off-limits to the outside world. We can be who we are with no airs. To our partner, it is the ultimate statement of vulnerability and trust.

2. **Solid planning.** We've got about nine months to go in 2005. Why not fire up your Palm Pilot and, along with your spouse, set some definitive activity time to be shared between the two of you? Not the traditional family trip up north or the winter cruise to the Caribbean. Something that will require both of you to plan and work together to make it work. Learning a new sport or hobby together, for instance.

3. **Availability and energy.** Becoming available is an obvious must to maintaining a healthy marital relationship. But beyond availability, the ability to bring the same amount of energy to it that is brought to a business transaction is also a must.

4. **Patience.** Isn't it interesting how at work we can sit quietly in a meeting without yawning, just patiently waiting for all that

must be said to be said so that we can move on with the agenda? We may know exactly what we want to happen, but we hold our tongue so that all viewpoints can be expressed. Within the marriage, there's a tendency to dispense with patience and just move on with it. Unfortunately, it says to your partner that what is important to them is not important to you and, I might add, vice-versa.

5. Unselfishness and mutuality. Two qualities of a high-performing executive team that go hand-in-hand are individual unselfishness and mutuality of commitment and purpose. These attributes help a functioning team perform together as a seamless entity. Most importantly, with these attributes in place, it's difficult for ego plays, one-upmanship and blame to contaminate the team atmosphere.

6. Respect the differences. Most high-performing executive teams periodically assess their strengths and weaknesses. The object is to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses. This is a dynamic business practice. Similarly, in a marriage, each partner has obvious strengths and weaknesses. In a high-performance marriage, couples take the time to share their perceived strengths and weaknesses.

7. Taking risks with honesty. As executives and managers, we are taught that the willingness to take calculated risks is healthy and necessary to achieve long-term business success. On the marriage scene, taking a calculated risk takes on a different dimension when you consider the fact that it must begin with honesty. To honestly tell your partner how you feel about an issue in the relationship can be a risky event.

8. Having fun together. The greatest CEOs I have ever known in TEC know how to have fun in their businesses. It can be in the form of company team sports, softball, bowling, Packer outings or a spontaneous celebration of business successes (as in obtaining a new customer account). The executive marriage situation is no different. Having fun is a time out

from the daily routine. It's a way to be playful, kid-like if you wish, and to smell the roses. As in the business setting, it can be very invigorating.

9. Passion. As executives, we know that sustaining passion in our businesses is our lifeblood. We also know it is very difficult to do so for a variety of reasons. You can pay an executive a fortune to be passionate, but I believe it can't be bought. It comes from a personal commitment to a deep-rooted, value system in which consistent practices make it an afterthought. In the marriage environment, the situation is no different. After awhile, the mystique and newness of it all tends to flounder. That doesn't mean it has to go away, but as in business, it can't be bought. We have to work at ways to keep it there. In high-performance marriages, it happens. Thanks, Viagra, but it is really more than that. Intimacy is truly multi-dimensional isn't it?

10. Forgiveness, healing and faith. How often in a business setting have you found yourself forgiving an associate or subordinate who made a big mistake, seemingly unforgivable at the time it occurred? The forgiveness gave way to a time of "healing feelings." And somehow, your faith in this person prevailed. Logic and reason probably did not dictate to you what to do, but your heart did. And it worked. Likewise, Dr. Druck says that the same protocol has to happen in a high-performing marital relationship. There will be times when forgiving is in order, when healing needs time to take place, and faith will serve as the foundation to it all.

Until next month, I hope these tips sustain you as a high-performing executive, but more so, sustain you as a high-performing spouse.

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