Dueling Duos
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Coping

Dueling Duos

Spousal Promotions Aren't Always Good News

By Marcela Kogan
Special to The Washington Post

The promotion you've been waiting for just came through. After years of hard work, you finally made it to director of marketing. Your wife, an association researcher, hugs you and pops open some champagne. During dinner, you reminisce about your accomplishments, dream about your future. Life is great.

Shortly after the champagne fizzles, though, your wife realizes that she hasn't been promoted in some time. She claims she is thrilled about your new job, but you begin to doubt it. She suddenly is too busy to go to your receptions, makes snide remarks about your "new attitude," and no longer asks you about your day.

Is she jealous of your success? Is she competing with you?

The answer probably is yes on both counts, according to psychologists who counsel couples. Competition in marriage is nothing new: Couples strive to outdo each other in many areas—who's the better cook, the better parent, the better gardener. In an age of two-paycheck households, spouses also compete around workplace issues—who is a better provider, whose job is more interesting, whose career is most important.

Rivalries about job-related matters surface most clearly when one partner's career skyrockets. Many ambitious professionals lagging behind at work feel a tinge of envy when their spouses are riding high on a promotion. Some even may try to thwart their partner's enthusiasm.

"Resentment at first is normal," says Washington psychologist Susan G. Mikesell, adding that one's success may highlight the other's frustrations. "There is also a fear that this change will disrupt the equilibrium of the marriage. The other person wonders, 'What role will I have now? Will I just be the significant other?' We don't like things to shift, even when they are good."

Mikesell does believe, however, that some degree of marital rivalry is positive because it challenges partners to move forward in their career and to think over the priorities of the relationship. "Usually competition is perceived as 'I'm getting in front of you, no matter what.' A healthier way to look at it is to see it as, 'Let's take turns to move forward. I'll get behind you, and you get behind me' "

Identifying and learning to channel one's competitive spirit is easier said than done, though. Many partners who enviously watch spouses forge ahead in their professions don't admit to feeling inadequate or threatened by changes in the relationship. Competition then can turn destructive as couples try to outdo each other to prove who is better or in control.

In some cases, the relationship already is on the rocks—and competing for whose job is more important accelerates the marriage's demise. Carol Moody recalls the duels she had with her former spouse after she purchased a home computer. Late at night, the newly hired corporate manager would sit before the screen, keying numbers into spreadsheets, oblivious to her surroundings.

Her husband, a government worker who usually left his office by 5 p.m., prepared dinner for his wife—then listened to the clicking of the keyboard, cursed the computer and snarled at his spouse. To curtail his wife's productivity, he started competing for equal time before the screen—and the computer soon became the focal point of their power struggle.

"He wanted to control something that was important to me," says the 45-year-old Bethesda resident, who ironically met her husband competing for the same job. "So he became a computer expert and felt he should have more time on it. He moved it into his study. I moved it into the hallway. It was the War of the Roses, but instead of the house, we fought over the computer."

Nobody won.

"When people feel good about themselves as individuals," says Lanham marriage and family therapist Barbara Fairfield, "they can roll with the punches; they won't feel beneath each other or threatened by change.

"But most of us bring to marriage feelings of inferiority. When something changes the status quo, our feelings of inferiority get accentuated. Couples in tune with each other will pick up on one person's envy and say, 'Let's talk about this.' They have to reevaluate what they can each bring into the relationship." But partners who never communicated well may let jealousies slide and put up with their spouse's bad attitude.

An office manager at a Rosslyn-based publishing firm is just too tired when she gets home from work to fight with her husband, who quit his job three years ago because of a disability. After much prodding, he agreed to pick up the kids at day care and cook an occasional meal, but he refuses to do other chores.

"He won't do laundry," says the 39-year-old resident of Fort Washington. "He believes that's a woman's job. I think he is grouchy and jealous of the fact that I'm working and he is not. He feels competitive with me. We got into an argument because I asked him to do the planting. His whole thing was, 'What's the undercurrent—because I'm not working, I'm not contributing?' "

BY BEATA SZPURA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Go-getters married to each other can learn to temper their competitive spirit and work as partners to help each other get ahead in their own work, adds Mikesell. The first step is for couples for recognize they are competing and to then talk about why they feel they have to vie for power.

Sometimes the need for one-upmanship stems from family relationships during childhood. "It helps to understand how competition was dealt with in your family," says Mikesell. People who realize their cutthroat attitudes are damaging can change those patterns and improve their relationship.

Other times, career-driven spouses stake out their turf when they feel threatened by their partner. Lori Vernoski prepared for combat when her husband asked her to join his carpeting business. Back then, Vernoski was climbing the ladder at an insurance company, making good money. She resented his request.

"I felt he wasn't taking my job seriously," says the 32-year-old Bethesda resident. "I couldn't see myself working just for Greg. I knew his job was our future. He owns the company, and we could run it as we pleased. But we had constant fights about what I should do."

Vernoski explained to him her fear of losing her independence, and her concern that Greg didn't consider her work important. Her husband, who apologized for expecting her to drop everything to join him, clarified that he was just thinking of their future and reassured her he'd give her autonomy. She now works at his store part-time—and started her own insurance firm on the side.

Spousal arguments can be particularly intense when the woman forges ahead, leaving behind resentful men who feel they should have the high-profile, better-paying jobs. Irene Natividad, chair of the National Council on Working Women, knows women whose political careers were stunted by jealous spouses who couldn't stand to see their wives get the limelight.

"I knew one man who wouldn't disclose his financial records," says Natividad's own husband, corporate manager Andrea Cortese, has been supportive of her career—despite his occasional outbursts at being called "Mr. Natividad" and the constant media intrusions, including a television crew turning his house upside down to do a "A Day in the Life of" show, featuring his wife. But Natividad and Cortese "always have on-going discussions about whose job is more important. We are both very competitive."

Natividad, who lives in Arlington, does her share of "wifely duties" and accompanies her husband to his company's events. "It's important to him that I be there," she says. "When I go with him, I'm the wife and it doesn't matter what I do or that I have ideas."

Men married to less-aggressive spouses don't have to worry about job competition at home. Sam Gerdano, executive director of a Washington-based institute, says he never competed with his wife, who enjoys her job as a government lawyer but "doesn't get all wrapped up in it." When he worked on the Hill, he says, he'd come home and regale his partner with tales of politics, power and corruption. In turn, she shared the latest developments in jurisprudence.

What would have happened if Gerdano droned on about his job, while his wife dazzled him with stories of political intrigue? "I'd probably have a typical male reaction," he speculates. "I may have tried to make my work sound more interesting and fabricate things, if need be. I may do whatever people do when faced with a situation where their self-esteem suffers."

But Gerdano says he hopes he would wise up and realize he was just being competitive, and then find a hobby or job that made him feel more fulfilled and less jealous of his wife's good fortunes. Fairfield and others recommend that spouses who feel inadequate engage in challenging activities that make them feel competent—working on a new project, taking up a sport.

Often times, spouses trailing behind their partners can turn envy into motivation. "Generally, people compete out of inadequacies," says Fairfield.

"When couples are trying to outdo each other," says Mikesell, "it usually means that nobody is taking care of the relationship; nobody is saying, 'We haven't been out to dinner for a while.' They need to step back and think whether the relationship is important to them."

But many spouses cringe at the thought of straggling behind even though deep down they want their loved ones to prosper. Fairfield believes that the stragglers can avoid being destructive by taking advantage of this situation and asking themselves: Am I doing what I really want? Is this the right job for me?

Natividad, former chair of the National Women's Political Caucus, "and that cost his wife the senatorial race. If he supported her from the beginning, he would have known that part of his commitment to her meant disclosure of how he runs his affairs."

"They want to be better than others and gain superiority. But if they [can turn envy] into admiration, that's self-competition. They are saying 'I want to come as close to [him/her] as I can and use that person as a role model.' "