

married, with business



BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND

START SMART

Before she even discusses the strategies of how she and Dennis Chapman have remained married for so many years where others have failed, Patricia Chapman notes that her husband is the love of her life and her very dear friend, someone for whom she shares mutual respect. This is not due to some lucky twist of fate, according to Dennis Chapman.

“Marry smart to begin with, and what I mean by that is, I think the biggest mistake couples make before they get married is they live in this Disney World of dating and having fun,” says Chapman. “Before you get married there needs to be a clear perspective from both parties about your business career, your financial situation, your volunteerism commitments, your personal commitments. You need real good clarity around that to start with.”

In their book *Getting to 50/50: How Working Couples Can Have it All By Sharing It All*, Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober (both working parents and wives themselves) state that “no matter how many children you have (or don’t have), the first step toward building a 50/50 marriage is the same for all of us: Talk about who will do what as soon as you can – and make it a lifelong discussion.”

“Marriages work better when roles are shared,” Meers says. “Inequality breeds instability.”

Marrying someone with a strong personality helps, too. “If you find balance in our own life, you’ll have it in your relationships,” says Patricia Chapman, who loves being a teacher and sharing her work experiences with her husband. “I don’t hold him accountable for my success or happiness and he doesn’t either.”

Amy Nichols founded Dogtopia, a dog day care chain headquartered in Bethesda, MD, at almost the exact same time she married Mike Schlegel, who now works for her as the vice president of franchise development. Like many CEOs, she often works late, misses dinnertime with her husband and two children, and relies on her husband, who has a more flexible schedule, to do a lot of the routine pickup and drop-off of the children. “It helps that Mike is very self-assured and confident,” Nichols says. “It takes a special person to be married to me and I know that. He is confident and has his own things that he likes to do and he’s always there for me.”

For his part, Schlegel understands his wife’s time away from home is for the greater good. “I know that she wouldn’t be working late unless there are hot items that need to be done,” he explains. “If I’m home and the boys are in the tub and I’m taking care of things, I never doubt that she’s working late for a good reason. And I communicate that to the boys, too.”

THE TIME CONUNDRUM

Working late – and on weekends, and over vacation, and early in the morning – is perhaps the largest complaint to arise in any high-powered executive relationship.

“In order for me to do what I do, I need to be the primary person out drumming up business,” says Jen Sterling, president and CEO of Hinge, a branding and marketing firm in Reston, VA, that she founded in 1992. “I need to go to breakfast meetings, networking events at night and I go out to do volunteer efforts to spread the word about my business. And then you must do all the things related to running the business, such as tracking financials, on weekends or at night when you’d otherwise be spending time with your spouse or your children.”

Sterling has been married to Rob Harris, who owns a digital printing firm, for 10 years and has a 5-year-old daughter. She says her husband makes it clear when her schedule is getting out of hand. What begins with snide comments grows into resentment and ends in a fight.

Patricia Chapman is a schoolteacher in Howard County, but she knows a few things about being a CEO – she’s been married to one for 32 years. Twenty years ago her husband Dennis J. Chapman Sr. founded The Chapman Group, a sales and effectiveness consulting firm based in Columbia, MD.

“I knew it was important to him to make and meet his goals, so when he formed the company, became CEO, and worked so hard, I found happiness through his success,” she explains. “Not that it was easy though. He puts in a lot of hours, a lot of time away from home.”

Maintaining a committed relationship is a challenge for any couple, but for CEOs there is the added challenge of long workdays driven by the need to constantly keep an eye on the business. As Patricia Chapman explains, “for me, my day starts at 7:30 a.m. and ends at about 5 p.m. For a CEO it truly is 24/7. On vacation or wherever you are – they’re always on call.”

CEOs also frequently possess certain personality traits that are required to get head and shoulders above the average businessperson, but that can be tough to segue into home life.

For a CEO who is building or maintaining a business in a competitive environment, the never-ending pressure to succeed and to keep a stable environment for one’s employees and ones self can create an imbalance in the home that if left unattended is as insidious as an invasive weed in a flourishing garden. It is important for both players in the partnership to be as attentive to what’s going on in the relationship as the CEO is to what’s taking place in the businesses.

MAKING CEO MARRIAGES WORK

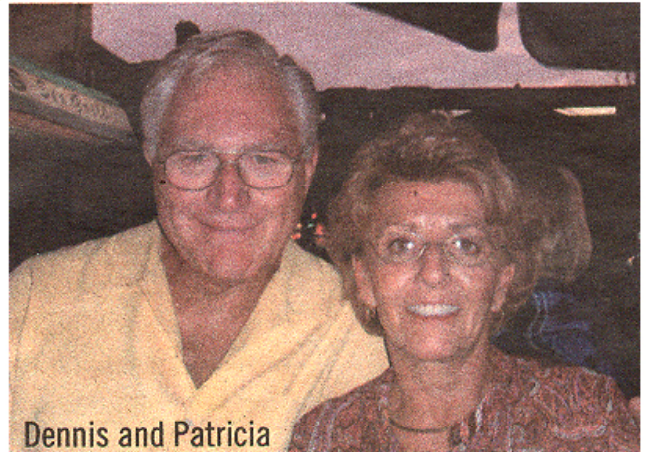
“You need to have safety valves so when resentment builds up, you have a mechanism to talk about it and release it,” Meers says.

Enter the importance of date night. It may seem like a superfluous time waster or a frivolous loss of time away from valuable business development opportunities, but a simple date night could be the difference between a marriage that succeeds and one that fails. For Sterling and her husband, Friday night is date night and it goes on the schedule next to the networking events, children’s plays and meetings. Now, Fridays are sacred; if she wants to attend a business event that falls on a Friday, she must negotiate it with her husband.

“Whether we get a babysitter or we’re with our kid or we’re just running errands to the grocery store, we’re together,” she explains. “And that has helped because it gives us time together where we talk about things that normally get bottled up.”

In addition, Sterling and her husband have scheduled time alone for their own pursuits. On Tuesday nights he practices with his band. Her night is Wednesday, which she tries to use for catching up with girlfriends (though she often uses it to catch up on work). Patricia Chapman follows this same strategy – though she often wishes she had more time together with her husband, she enjoys having time to herself to pursue her own passions.

Date night doesn’t need to be something formal. It can mean capturing a moment when it presents itself. The important thing, says Dennis Chapman, is to not get complacent. “The danger is that you get tired when you’re busy and it’s easy to just come home and crash in front of the TV,” he says. “You need to ask yourself every day what you can do for each other.” Sometimes he and his wife grab a coffee at Starbucks, have lunch together, or take a quick walk around the neighborhood. “When you see opportunities, grab them.”



Dennis and Patricia

