

# You and Your Organization: A Match Made in Heaven?

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If you know what's best for you, you don't bring up the 'D' word in a marriage unless you really mean it. Getting a divorce is a serious matter, although it happens quite often, with about 40 to 50 percent of the couples in the U.S. and UK calling it quits (Dew, 2002; Dobson & Habershon, 2006).

While 60 percent of marriages last, the commitment is quite a bit shorter for employees and employers. People are now staying in their job for an average of only 4.1 years (BLS, 2006), and in a healthy economy, movement is quickly becoming the norm. Similar to a marital divorce, professional divorce is expensive for both the employee and the employer. For the employee, a divorce means change—something that no one likes. Commonly, people don't change unless they feel sufficient pain to motivate a change, and hence, the pain of changing jobs is perceived as less stressful than the pain of staying. Employees experience the 'push' to get out of the job, the 'friction' of moving and changing and the 'pull' of a new opportunity. If the value of leaving is higher than that of staying, the employee is gone.

Employee departure has equally painful consequences for the organization—the hard costs of training a new person, the lost historical knowledge of the employee, the emotional and workload impacts on the rest of the staff—all of these liabilities provide significant motivation for the company to do what it can to convince the employee to stay in the partnership. So, what breaks up a professional marriage? Since all relationships function on the same basic principles, let's turn to the experts in marriage therapy to shine light on the subject.

## Entering a Relationship

When I think about an employee considering employment, I am reminded of the scene in the Disney movie *Bambi* where the mother deer cautiously, tentatively pokes her neck out of the woods

and into the field to see if it's safe for her fawn to play. Note that the mother is the cautious player—young Bambi would simply run out into the open field, not understanding the dangers that can lurk.

Similarly, consider the approach of a new graduate versus a seasoned professional as they consider a new employment opportunity. The new graduate bounds forth, excited about the opportunities that lie ahead. He/she is more likely to be willing to put in long hours, find the rigorous travel schedule exhilarating and say 'yes' to any goal the organization can throw at him/her. (This is, of course, a generalization, and one that applies more to professional careers.)

The seasoned professional often has a different approach. Research by Anne-Rigt Poortman of The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research has shown that those who have been in a previous marriage change their relationship behavior with later partners. As Poortman explores individuals' 'relationship careers' in the 'marriage market,' she finds that those previously divorced opt for less committed relationships in the future, and enter into relationships more cautiously. She hypothesizes that the increased trepidation likely stems from the lessons learned from their previous negative experiences (ScienceDaily, 2007).

Organizations can be smarter recruiters armed with this concept. HR representatives can build in more company, job and task information for the seasoned professional hiring process. They can work to demonstrate trustworthiness by being more respectful of timelines and maintaining a high level of communication with the applicant throughout the recruiting process. Organizations can consider being flexible with non-compete agreements. Taken together, these suggestions may help the more experienced professional enter the partnership.

### Strengthening the Partnership

Once the employee has joined the 'family,' certain behaviors and practices strengthen the employer-employee bond. Judith Wallerstein, Ph.D., co-author of the book, "The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts," delineated psychological tasks required for a marriage to succeed. Six tasks may be useful in strengthening the work relationship:

**1. Separate emotionally from the family you grew up in, but not to the point of estrangement so that personal identities are well formed.**

*At-work translation:* Keep what works, remain open to learning opportunities. Employees should reflect on experiences, but remain open to the new organization's way of working and thinking. If employees stay true to their working style, values and ethics, they can make decisions based on experiences and individual ways of thinking. However, checking in with their new boss can ensure ideas are well aligned with the direction and function of the organization.

**2. Build togetherness based on shared intimacy and identity, but also set boundaries to protect individuals' identities.**

*At-work translation:* Build relationships while maintaining autonomy. Shared values and working together in a fun environment can allow people to get to know and trust each other. However, people need to be able to act on their own accord, so continue to let individuals set their own goals and allow them to fulfill those goals in their own way, given that their approach is copasetic with the team's plans and actions.

**3. Confront and master crises.**

*At-work translation:* Inevitably, the unexpected derails even the best-laid plans. A team needs to work together to generate a plan of attack and each individual needs to do his or her share of the work to overcome the obstacle. Overcoming crises further bonds the remaining members together as they learned to rely on and trust each other.

**4. Maintain the bond in the face of adversity by allowing both partners to express their differences, anger and conflict.**

*At-work translation:* Work relationships, specifically the employee-boss relationship, should remain open to both the positive and the negative. While employers and management often openly decree their expectations, employees need to feel safe in expressing doubts, frustration, fear or anger; if not, these negative feelings will fester, and have the potential to poison other members of the staff or hurt the individual's own credibility in the organization.

Individuals will always have their own will, and therefore, employers need to be open to working within the employees' wants and needs to achieve organizational objectives. Similarly, employees should be flexible in their understanding of the organizational opinion, and try to understand management motivations for the decisions that have been made.

**5. Use humor and laughter to avoid rote behavior and isolation.**

*At-work translation:* Have fun at work. People need to get to know each other on a level deeper than the professional 'face' in order to know others' rules for humor. Managers should drop their guards and show employees their 'softer side.' Employees should be given the opportunity to bond at a personal level by sponsoring lunches and after-work events. Team days should have an element of fun after the work is done. All of this being said, fun should be had in the context of a respectful working environment, allowing individuals to feel safe letting down their guard in the future.

**6. Nurture and comfort each other, recognizing the need for an interdependent relationship.**

*At-work translation:* No one is an island. Although some employers may feel the employee is indebted to them and have signed on to do whatever is required, employees may feel that the organization owes them a rewarding experience. Truth be told, both parties are entering into an interdependent relationship, and no one party is more valuable than the other is. Creating equity between employer and employee can fuel increased trust and respect, and acting out of respect can further bond employee and employer.

Additionally, research from Shelly Gable, Ph.D., as published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, indicates that how you respond to positive events may be more important in strengthening a marriage than how the couple responds to negative events. She hypothesizes on the cause of her findings to the American Psychological Association. "When you are talking about a negative event... the best a partner can do is bring you back to an average state—a not upset state. Positive events offer a lot more opportunity for growth in a relationship because there is less on the line in terms of stress and self-esteem." Gable found that couples who 'cheerlead' their partner's successes, rather than expressing doubts or being impassive, reported higher relationship satisfaction and were less likely to break up. It is easy to see the parallel to the world of work. So often, goals are achieved with the next tasks fast on its heels. The successes are rarely celebrated. Often, goal achievement translated into higher goals for the next year, or more difficult assignments, creating an atmosphere of punishment for successes. Taking the time to be positive and tangibly linking recognition and rewards with successes can go a long way in strengthening the partnership.

### The Evolution of the Relationship

Relationships of any type are bound to change over time, and the individuals change, grow and evolve. Research conducted by both Elaine Hatfield, Ph.D., published in the book “Aging: Stability and the Change in Family,” and Susan Sprecher, Ph.D., published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* demonstrate that passionate and companionate love diminish over time; this was an interesting finding, as it was assumed that companionate love increases as the passion of a new relationship decreases. However, Sprecher did find that commitment increased over time. What caused this increase? Sprecher notes that it is the intermittent re-kindling of passion that kept the home fires burning.

At work, organizational behaviorists talk about the ‘honeymoon period,’ or the feelings of excitement that occur when an employee begins a new job. Invariably, the employee finds out in short order that the organization, its management and the team to which he or she has joined all have their faults. The passion fueling the employee’s work may be threatened. The inevitable change in work attitudes, growth as a professional, and broadening of expertise and perspective must be accommodated by the organization if it wishes to retain the employee. The employee can identify the source of his or her passion, communicate his or her motivations to managers and, collectively, seek out opportunities to fan the flame.

As organizations evolve, so might their values or work ethic. Consider organizations that start small, but grow quickly. What was once an entrepreneurial climate may defer by necessity to lines of authority and decision-making frameworks, as they grow too large to allow for independent choices. This necessary and prudent evolution may conflict with original employees’ way of working. Robert J. Sternberg, Ph.D. published his book “Love is a Story,” which emphasizes that happy, committed couples share the same ‘story’ of their relationship; in essence, they similarly define their relationship’s values and way-of-being. Employees who view their role in the same way that organizational leadership envision the company may be more likely to remain committed to their job and the company.

### The Demise of the Relationship

Some relationships are doomed to fail. Others simply grow apart—perhaps one party is growing or adapting faster, or in a different direction. Whatever the impetus, *T & D Magazine* listed a few of the signs that might mean it’s time for the employee to consider moving on:

- Managerial abandonment, neglect or indifference
- Lack of managerial closeness—using email rather than face-to-face conversations and a lack of eye contact when the employee and manager actually do meet
- Comments no longer solicited and employee opinions ignored
- An overall negative tone, which may include the manager paying more attention to hours than contributions

Reasons for divorce vary widely, but Paul de Graaf of Radboud University and Matthijs Kalmijn of Tilburg University have researched the issue and discovered a few critical components. By interviewing 1,700 people in The Netherlands, their research points to the following catalysts:

- An increase in individualism
- The increase of options for women in the world of work
- The increase of emphasis put on companionship over economic benefits of marriage
- Excessive working hours of spouse
- Increase in household workload
- Disrespectful personal habits of the spouse
- Emotional factors, including lack of attention and communication
- Violence
- Infidelity

These motivators of divorce can be applied to the employee-employer relationship. Individualism and an increase in options allow employees to be pulled into a new organization more easily, and are likely to encourage employees to consider alternatives more quickly in the face of adversity in their current roles. Similarly, economics are no longer a reason to stay; in fact, employees often receive a substantial increase in compensation when joining a new organization. The spouse’s work hours, an increase in household tasks and disrespectful personal habits might be equated to a lack of consideration for the other person.

Finally, emotional factors, infidelity and violence represent points along an ‘abusive’ continuum—one side of which is anchored with indifference, then neglect, while the other side moves toward hurtful actions, such as infidelity and violence. Unfortunately, indifference and employee neglect run rampant in organizations because leaders and managers are individual contributors whose roles and rewards are simply not structured for managerial duties. Even worse, abuse and violence in the workplace certainly exist—whether it is through racial or sexist practices, threats in the workplace, badly handled downsizing or off-shoring, or acts of outright harassment. Let us remember that in some organizations, it is perfectly acceptable to swear at your colleagues, publicly berate their performance and call them names. Practices such as these damage the organization’s relationships with the employee, and if any alternative exists for the employee, then the situation most certainly will result in employee flight.

### What Can Be Done to Avoid Professional Divorce

Because marital divorce is a fiscally, emotionally and socially expensive act, various state and local governments have attempted to intervene with martial precounseling laws. This legislation, proposed in 10 states since 2002, makes counseling mandatory for anyone applying for a marriage license. This counseling can be provided by a variety of professionals, including clergy, psychologists, therapists, mentor couples or life coaches.

The thrust of the counseling is to provide education to couples about the workings of marriage; in essence, providing a 'realistic job preview' for the couples before they commit. Couples are expected to learn specific marriage 'skills,' which will help them avoid the road to divorce. Mentors provide ongoing support as the couples navigate their first challenges.

Sounds like work training, doesn't it? It is important to select qualified people, and then during the recruitment phase, give the applicant a realistic preview of the job. Once aboard, an efficient onboarding process is critical, giving the employee the right skills to get started. Finally, assigning the employee a work partner or mentor can help the employee navigate the social, procedural and performance-based requirements necessary for being a contributing partner in the professional marriage.

That being said, not all marriages are made in heaven. Sometimes it is in the best interest of both parties to move on. Nevertheless, if there is common ground and a need that each party fulfills for the other, I might suggest trying to make it work. ■

### **About the Author**

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Brenda Kowske, Ph.D., is a research consultant for the Kenexa Research Institute. Dr. Kowske specializes in conducting valid and reliable research that informs talent decisions to improve overall organizational performance. Throughout her career in leadership and research consulting, she has successfully tailored online survey processes for strategic decision-making and workforce insight; created valid performance measurement systems and metrics that differentiate employees, and conducted talent analytics for compensation, promotion and development decisions.

Dr. Kowske has published numerous white papers and articles for academic and professional journals. She is a member of the Academy of Management, Academy of Human Resource Development, American Psychological Association and Society for Industrial Organizational Psychologists. She holds a Doctorate in human resource development and a Master of Education from the University of Minnesota.

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