

Training for Executive Spouses Can Deliver Major Return

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By Colette Young

When an employee gets handed the key to the executive washroom, they're also given the training and tools they need to step into their new jobs. But what about the spouse? While spousal buy-in is becoming an increasingly critical element of executive success, it's often an overlooked piece of the puzzle.

It's becoming more and more clear: spouses, whether they're also employed or not, have a major impact on their husbands' or wives' effectiveness and productivity at work—and even on the company's bottom line. Especially in this difficult economy, corporations looking to improve results are turning to a new way of thinking that can pay tremendous dividends—training for spouses.

Executive spouses often find themselves in unfamiliar territory as they deal with their new, high-profile and often high-pressure roles. And the way they react can provide restorative support or undermining resentment. Balancing any career with a satisfying home life is never easy. And factor in the long hours and stress that often accompany a high-profile executive position, especially if it means a move to a new community, and it can become even more challenging to achieve balance between work and personal life. The stress involved with frequent travel, aggressive goals, demanding clients, and other stakeholders can test even the most committed relationships. But the right training and support can work wonders.

Over my two decades as an executive spouse, and in my experience mentoring other executive spouses, I've found there are four critical elements of a successful executive/spouse partnership, all of which can be part of the preparation/training process:

Acceptance. Both spouses absolutely must believe they are in it for the long-term. They need to accept they're in it together, know they have a plan, and be willing to make it happen. It may take years to achieve their goals, and both partners need to commit to not only the end result, but the journey, as well. Both need to recognize there will be sacrifices along the way, but the end results can be rewarding on many fronts.

Adaptability. After identifying and committing to the team plan, each spouse will likely have to prove they're willing to adapt along the way. And often, that can mean taking an uncomfortable first step. For some it can be as simple as getting into their car and driving around the block in a new, unfamiliar neighborhood; for others, it may mean making a big leap like exploring a new career.

Accountability. Each member of the couple needs to be accountable to the other, and to themselves. It's vital both spouses realize they need to approach the challenge as a team. The spouse climbing the corporate ladder can experience extreme pressure and loneliness along the way. Or, when one spouse gets a shiny new promotion and picks up the family to a new city or country, for instance, it may be difficult for the other spouse (often called the "trailing spouse") to immediately find a job in the new community. Instead of placing blame on the executive and bottling up resentment, the spouse needs to communicate his or her feelings and find a way to pursue their own passions and interests.

After spending five years in an overseas assignment with my husband, we decided to move to Chicago so he could accept a promotion. I couldn't find a teaching job there, and it was frustrating. We talked about it and brainstormed ideas for how I could spend my time as I continued my job search. I loved hardware stores and I loved to learn, so I decided to turn my attention to our unfinished basement—and finished it myself. It took four months, but the experience was phenomenal.

Absolute support. Demonstrating unwavering support is a critical piece of the puzzle. Both spouses need to make concessions to make sure the other one is happy and fulfilled, and appreciates the other's contributions. It's incredibly rewarding when your spouse recognizes you as a valuable resource and partner, and it's doubly rewarding when they share it with peers who recognize it, too. Watch any awards show on TV, and you'll see countless examples of high-powered people profusely thanking their spouses for years of support.

While it's important to provide ongoing support for spouses, all of these elements could be easily covered in a single training session, or in a series of seminars over time as an employee—and his or her family—gets settled in to a new situation.

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