

# Spouses prove working together can be done

By [Anna Sowa](#) / *The Bulletin*

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By Anna Sowa / The Bulletin

After more than 12 years of marriage, Brian and Dianna Shawver decided it was time to take their partnership to the next level. In 2002, the Bend couple bought security-guard business Security Pros Inc., and Brian Shawver grew the company to the point where his wife could join. By 2004, the couple, who married in 1990, were working together for the first time.

"It hasn't been too long," Brian Shawver, 40, said of their work relationship. "And we're still married."

Even though they work in the other's space every day, the Shawver's have made a situation work that some couples might find daunting.

The Shawver's' work relationship is not unique in Central Oregon. Although no regional data tracks the number of husband-wife businesses, Central Oregon's entrepreneurial economy lends itself to many couples taking their partnerships into the workplace.

Wayne Rivers consults businesses run by family members - from husband-wife teams to multigenerational teams. Rivers is a family-business executive coach for the Family Business Institute in Raleigh, N.C. He incorporated the institute in 1995 with his father-in-law, Tom Campbell.

He says couple-owned businesses are common, but they typically involve smaller businesses. Restaurants, for example, tend to attract family ownership.

"Most couples frankly would prefer not to work together," Rivers said. "It puts pressure on the marriage and kids."

The typical pitfall, he says, is that a marriage partnership often is confusing for other employees. "Husbands and wives aren't that accountable to each other in business because they're equals," he said. "As a business, they still make joint decisions, but the buck doesn't stop with anybody, so it gets confusing for employees."

Rivers' advice: Couples who are in business together need clearly defined roles and responsibilities. They also need accountability.

"The only way to truly have accountability in a business is to have a real-life board of advisers," he said. "That board of advisers should be comprised of peers who the family and employees really can respect and look up to."

Power sharing

Couples who have made it work say the keys to having a successful husband-wife business partnership include sharing and dividing work responsibilities, setting guidelines for managing the business, sharing goal-making and key business decisions and, above all, drawing a distinct line between work and home.

"In any other (business) partnership, if someone isn't contributing as much as the other person, there's tension," Brian Shawver said. "The trick is to leave work at work. If I've got a lot going on

and I'm tired and need to go home, before walking out the door I'll turn around and say, 'Stay,' and put my hand out like a stop sign."

That's Shawver's way to keep the stresses and challenges of his work world confined to the office. His method works, he said.

Like the Shawvers, Bend-based Pelican Bay Forest Products owners Ron and Joni Hanson are rarely out of each other's sight at work and at home. But most days, they don't talk, absorbed in their respective tasks. And they prefer it that way.

"It works," Joni Hanson, 51, said. "He's a wild and crazy guy and I tone things down - it's a good blend."

The Hansons say that after almost 32 years of marriage - 20 of which they've worked together - the secret to a happy professional and personal life is not to bring business home. Despite the doubting looks from their friends, they've made it work for decades. They divide up responsibilities at the lumber wholesale business, stay out of each other's space and draw on their different personality traits - Hanson is gregarious, while Joni is reserved - to balance each other during turbulence at work and at home.

"I don't think there are too many people who can do it," Ron Hanson, 53, said of working with a spouse. "It can put a lot of stress on relationships."

The Hansons keep from suffocating each other by keeping busy at their various job responsibilities, Ron Hanson said. Ron handles sales and Joni manages the office. They rarely talk, he says.

"And we don't talk about work after 5 p.m.," Joni Hanson said.

"Five-thirty p.m.," Ron corrected, because sometimes it's nice to vent about work to someone who knows exactly what he's talking about.

Bend dentists Jim and Ginny Murtaugh echoed some of the Hansons' experiences. The couple have worked together nearly all of their 27 years of marriage. The partnership makes sense, Ginny Murtaugh says, because combining into one dental practice reduces their business overhead and competition. It also has allowed them to create more flexible schedules, so they can spend more time with their two young children.

The couple enjoy working together toward a common professional goal and using each other as resources for ideas to expand the business.

"We learned in the first five years the roles that each of us would play," Ginny Murtaugh, 50, said of when the Laguna, Calif., couple started their first practice together in 1986. She does employee relations and Jim works on their business philosophy and office goals.

"Because each person has their own assigned duties, there's less conflict," Jim Murtaugh, 51, said. "I can defer certain issues to Ginny."

Their employees appreciate it, Ginny Murtaugh said.

"We work well together, so the staff responds (well) to that," she said, adding that in the past, some staff members have played her and her husband against each other. "Patients like that we're family oriented."

The couple rarely find themselves working side by side, which they say is another thing that helps their situation work - each works two days per week and on different patients.

"When we did share (the same space at the same time), it didn't work out too well," Ginny Murtaugh said, adding that if the couple worked on the same patients, their differing medical advice would create more fireworks. "(But now), even though we work together, we're not always working together."

Like the Hansons, the Murtaughs say the trick is to leave work at the office and leave personal issues at home. Sharing power and delegating responsibilities also helps, Ginny Murtaugh said.

"Working together is good because we can definitely have similar philosophies," she said. "We're going toward the same goal, and that's kind of nice."

"After 20-some years working together, you merge and become unified in your thinking," Jim Murtaugh said. "It's an equal partnership, like any modern marriage."

At Bend Mailing Services, owners Sam and Nanci Di Spaltro have worked together for nearly all of their almost 37 years of marriage. The couple first began working together at a 7-Eleven

franchise in the Los Angeles area after they were married, moving to Bend 14 years ago. The couple bought Bend Mailing Services- which mails business and government bills and statements as well as advertising fliers, newsletters and other specialty pieces- 10 years ago and have brought their two sons into the business as well.

Working in convenience stores together helped the Di Spaltros figure out their individual strengths, much like the Murtaughs, and helped them in their careers and in their relationship as the years progressed, Nanci Di Spaltro said.

"It made us stronger," she said. "You have to learn how to work at getting along. You have to accept things."

"When you come home and are all upset about something, it's a lot easier if someone can empathize with you," Sam Di Spaltro said. "Someone who understands the problem."

But the Di Spaltros don't know if they'd recommend working with a spouse to anyone.

"Some people say, 'Oh I couldn't stand that,' " Nanci Di Spaltro said. "But it just seems to me that it brings you together."

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