

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Putting Your Marriage First

by Dr. Mike Armour

Recently I read *The McKinsey Mind*, a look inside one of the world's leading strategic consulting companies through the eyes of former employees.

The authors, themselves former McKinsey consultants, are generally singular in their praise of McKinsey techniques and methods. But they lamented McKinsey's less than family-friendly environment. Exhaustive work schedules, long workdays, and heavy travel demands are the routine at McKinsey. And these commitments easily take an exacting toll on employee families.

But McKinsey is hardly the only corporate culprit when it comes to "family unfriendliness." Of all the complaints I hear from managers and executives, none is more frequent than the challenge of balancing what their company's demands of them against the needs of their families and marriages.

I wish I could believe that his problem will go away soon. But in an age of down-sizing and cost-cutting, the problem is likely to get even worse before it gets better. The best we can do is to minimize its impact. So let me offer some suggestions for keeping your marriage strong, whatever the demands of your job.

The Primary Relationship

For couples with children, it's easy to forget that the primary relationship in the family is the husband-wife relationship. Unless there are step-children in the home, the husband-wife relationship preceded the parent-child relationship. And hopefully the husband-wife relationship will continue long after the children have left home.

But in the press of daily life, it's easy to use up all our discretionary time taking care of the children and their needs. The husband-wife relationship goes into "maintenance mode." Conversations between the two devolve almost exclusively around household "operational" issues, most of them connected one way or the other to the kids. Over time, the failure to nurture their own relationship does telling damage to husbands and wives.

For decades over a third of our divorces -- some studies suggest as high as 40% of them -- have occurred shortly after the last child leaves home. Why? Because once the children are gone, the couple discovers that they have drifted miles apart. Without the kids to talk about, they no longer have a broad base of common interests and commitments. Their time together becomes dead and boring.

Keep Dating

It's imperative, therefore, for couples to "keep dating" all the way through the child-rearing years and beyond, to keep their relationship fresh and alive. When I say "keep dating," I mean going out at least twice a month — more often, if possible — and having an evening or an afternoon just for the two of you. No kids. And no discussion of the kids. This is a time to rekindle romance.

In fact, the fundamental rule for this date is, "No operational discussions." No talk about finances. Or the kid's college plans. Or a new car for your teenage daughter.

This date is a time for the two of you just to have fun together and to bond once more as you did when you were dating originally. You didn't fall in love by talking about household operational decisions. And you're not likely to rekindle romance by talking about them now.

Instead, you fell in love by learning about each other. Getting a glimpse inside the other's life. What her dreams are. What his goals are. What you both want to do in the future. That's more nearly the kind of thing you want to talk about on your date. Because she still has dreams. New ones, no doubt. And he is pondering new goals. And both of you are adding new textures to what you want in the future.

Operational conversations, of course, are necessary. Make a time for them. Just don't burn up your date time with them. This is time to do the things you would do on an evening out if no kids had ever come along.

Kid Swapping

One problem for many young families, especially those on limited budgets, is that two or three dates a month require too much money for baby-sitting. The budget just can't handle it. One way to tackle this problem -- and I've seen dozens of families do it — is to form a "baby-sitting combine."

Find another couple or two who face the same dilemma. Agree to keep their kids twice a month so they can go out, in turn for which they will watch your kids twice a month for you and your spouse to date. For instance, two couples might get together and agree that Thursday night will be their night out each week. One couple would date on the first and third Thursday nights of the month, the second couple on the second and fourth Thursday nights.

Then, each Thursday the "stay at home" couple would watch the other's kids. It's simple, easy to coordinate, and doesn't cost a lot of money for babysitting. I've seen it work marvelously.

Put It In the Palm Pilot

Whether you've got kids or not, those twice-a-month dates are too important to leave them to chance. It won't do to say, "We'll just see how things shape up over the next two weeks, and maybe we can find an evening along the way to go out." Schedule your dates. Put them in your Day-Timer or Palm Pilot scheduler the same way you would any other vital commitment. Then keep everything else from pre-empting your commitment.

And if you have kids, do the same thing with your time for them. As a college president I found it easy to use the ever-present demands of the job as an excuse for working long, late hours, day after day. I would think, "I'm going to take half the afternoon on Thursday for my daughter." But come Thursday, the phone would ring shortly after lunch and some "emergency" had come up that soon burned up the entire afternoon.

Finally, I started putting time for my daughter on my schedule. I might decide on Monday that Wednesday afternoon, 3-5 was her time. If the chairman of the board called at noon on Wednesday and wanted to drop by late that afternoon, I would simply say, in a courteous tone, "You know, I've got something very important on my schedule just then. What other time might work for you?"

No one ever asked what the "important thing" on my schedule was. So I never had to tell them I was going to be out playing ball with a twelve year old. I always reminded myself that lots of people could be the president of the college. But I was the only person who could be her daddy.

No One Will Do It For You

Corporate America will rarely encourage you to put family first. Not many bosses are going to say, "Why are you working so late? You need to be home with your family. What's on your desk can wait." No one is going to prioritize your family for you. You've got to do it yourself. So don't put it off. Make it happen.

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