

Lee: Entrepreneurship and marriage. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode 212.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Mixing Business with Pleasure. Some live by this motto. Others try everything they can to avoid it. It's difficult to maintain or even improve your marriage with a spouse that is constantly on the clock. What if you could take the working lessons that you've learned in the business world and use them to improve your marriage? Sounds too good to be true, right? No, no, no. Wrong. Both business and marriage are something that require a lot of time, effort and attention to maintain. It can be hard to find a balance in life when there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day. Learn how to transform your business finesse into techniques that can improve your marriage.

Rob Danzman is the founder and clinical director of Fonthill Counseling in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he specializes in cognitive behavior therapy, family crisis management and marriage and family therapy. Rob, welcome to the show.

Rob: Thanks, Lee. Thanks for having me.

Lee: We've done shows in the past about how to not bring business into the bedroom. Now, my sense is that you're advocating that we should do just the opposite. What problems are you seeing for couples who can't seem to take their mind off of work?

Rob: A lot of the time, we compartmentalize things. In a lot of relationships, we think that business, if we own a business, that's exclusive to the family and that family is exclusive to the business. While, in theory, that sounds great, but from a very functional and practical perspective, that's just not reality. People work early hours, they stay late in the office, and that's the nature of owning a business and entrepreneurship. That's also the same quality of a strong marriage is doing things early and staying up late for things. I think there are a lot of similarities, but it can also create a lot of conflict.

Lee: That's what I'm curious about. What sort of issues do you see with couples where you've got an entrepreneur and they are doing that starting early, staying late, talking about business all the time? What's the impact of that on the marriage?

Rob: Well, it can be pretty significant if couples don't have an early and frequent dialogue about not only their shared goals and everything, but also specific goals to the different entities. By entities, I mean a business that's owned or even a business trip that someone needs to go on or the requirements of each individual's own individual life. Normally, what I see are not entrepreneurial couples. I see one individual who is entrepreneurial and they are either balanced, counter-balanced by a spouse or significant other that isn't as interested in entrepreneurship or owning a business. That can create a lot of conflict because that other spouse may not understand or appreciate the struggles of entrepreneurship and the demands that it takes.

Lee: Makes a lot of sense. What are you thinking in terms of the skills that an entrepreneur brings? They've got these entrepreneurial skills that they're using in their business. Do you see opportunities for carrying some of those business skills into the marriage? What's that all about?

Rob: What I've seen fairly often are a set of skills that an entrepreneur has that if we were to repackage them and rename them, could actually be pretty phenomenal relationship skills - being committed, working through problems. One of the skills that I've heard a lot that entrepreneurs need to have is not having a fear of rejection and hearing "no" a whole lot before they hear "yes". Not that necessarily in a relationship we want to hear "no" a whole lot to get to "yes", but being able to work through what seems to be an endless stream of problems and obstacles or just demands. Having a long-term vision, I think, is really important and it's something that is shared between the two, between a healthy marriage and also entrepreneurship.

Another important aspect is flexibility. Within entrepreneurship, flexibility is essential. There is no such thing as a business plan that is written before the startup phase and then is completely executed the exact way that it was originally written. It just doesn't happen. Entrepreneurship is about pivoting all the time whether it's about the product that's being sold, the services offered or the way that things are funded. In a marriage, that is completely about pivoting, flexibility and changing the goals ever so slightly based on environmental conditions. I think that's another thing that both have in common.

Lee: Now, I know from following you that you have some ideas about the essential elements of keeping a relationship going and applying some of these entrepreneurial ideas. Tell me about that. What are the elements that you think matter?

Rob: I'm actually going to start with what seems to be the strangest one, and have a little dialogue about that because in the past, people have raised eyebrows about this, which is execution. That sounds a little morbid even, maybe. As an entrepreneur, if I say execution, individuals understand what that means, which is a bias towards action, getting things done, being obsessed with the outcome and not getting stuck down in the weeds and finding excuses for why things can't get done.

That's one of the five things that in a marriage, if we bridge over into the marriage category, it's so easy in a marriage, in a relationship, especially when there are children involved, to find reasons why things couldn't get done, why the dishes couldn't be put away, why we couldn't go on vacation. If we think about how similar those are and what it does to the entrepreneur, when an entrepreneur does not have a bias towards action, that entrepreneur is not an entrepreneur for very long then. They get overwhelmed with all the excuses and there's no revenue and then things close down, or they don't get through the startup phase.

Lee: Right. Right.

Rob: There's a similar phenomenon in relationships. If we are not developing a bias towards action in a relationship, if we are not demonstrating love and affection, how can a relationship last?

Lee: I buy it. Execution is the first of your five essential elements of making the marriage work. What's an example of execution in action in a marriage? Tell me specifically. If I want to execute tonight, what do I need to do?

Rob: Let's come up with a typical scenario. I get home from work and it's, let's say, 8:00 or something like that. It could be very easy for me to recognize that I had promised to maybe, take care of some responsibilities around the house or maybe, something that has to do with the relationship, something that has to do with the family. It's easy for me to use the excuse of, "I had a long day. I made money today. I invested in our family in other ways."

Over time, there is an accumulated effect where those excuses add up to a point where the spouse or significant other may say, "Gosh, you know?" The spouse wouldn't use this language, but "You're able to execute in your business. You're able to have enough energy to make things happen in that part of your world. But in our world, in our relationship and our family and marriage, it seems like execution is not as high a priority. For you, it's showing up is all you have to do." I see that a whole lot. That's a huge factor in relationships.

Lee: Execution is element number one of these five elements. What's the next one?

Rob: These are in no particular order. Execution is one of the weirder ones or one of the stranger labeled ones. One of the main ones, which is almost a cliché at this point but still has to be on the list, is communication. Communication skills is just an essential component in relationships. It's not just communicating in a way that is honest and open. This segues into some of the other items on the list, but it's communicating boundaries. It's communicating limits. It's communicating needs in a way that is not only respectful of the individual that's expressing it, but also the person that is on the other side that's the recipient of the information.

The other thing is working from a set of established rules, so to speak, which, again, goes into boundaries quite a bit. One example that I hear very often in the work that I do is that whether it's a husband or wife or significant other, will bring up past events. Even though what the issue was in an argument was something very specific, like, "I asked you to take the trash out and now it's overflowing and this is really frustrating for me." In response, a defensive response, from the spouse is, "Well, you never..." you can fill in the blank. It's globalizing and really just not fair, and it's not healthy because how can anyone ever win that argument? How can anyone respond in kind when something becomes globalized like that? That's one of the major components of the communication skills, which also segues into the boundaries, like I said.

Lee: You experts are always wanting us to communicate in order to make our marriages work. It's like, "OK. Fine. We'll do it. We'll communicate." What's number three on your list of these essential ideas that'll keep the marriage working?

Rob: Let's get into boundaries then. Boundaries are something that, over time, has become what I'm specifically known for, no matter what the work I'm doing is, whether I'm working with an entrepreneurial family or if I'm working with just a traditional, outpatient client. It's amazing how one of the lowest common denominators often is boundary violation and a lack of setting boundaries and setting appropriate limits.

It's amazing to me how often I work with people that are easily smarter than me, wealthier than me, probably even better looking than me. Yet they have not learned how to set appropriate, healthy boundaries. It's interesting because they learn how to set boundaries, and I'm speaking specifically about entrepreneurs, they learn how to set those boundaries within their entrepreneurial domain, their life domain of business and what they will and will not do for a client or for VC funding or for a partner. Yet when it comes to a relationship, when it comes to a family member, the lines are all blurry.

I'll give you one example. This actually just happened about a week ago. I was talking with a mother who was describing her parenting style. I asked her to give me some examples of when she is spending time with her daughter and just describe some of the behaviors that she remembers. One of the things she said was, "Oh, well, my daughter will crawl over my lap, reach into my bag and grab the iPad out and just start playing with it." No. Many people would not even think about that being a boundary violation, but it is a major boundary violation. That child is essentially being reinforced through a smile from the mother, through no consequences, that it is appropriate to go through mother's handbag and take what she wants.

If we project that into the future, we can see some pretty ugly things coming from that. We can see someone who doesn't respect boundaries with credit cards or a driver's license or other relationships. What happens when that person thinks that they are the center of the world, and they don't understand why people are giving them negative feedback about getting their wants met however they want it?

One of the interesting things is that there are a gazillion business books from gurus on setting boundaries and strategies and all that kind of stuff. Yet for relationships, there are a lot of books on communication. There are a lot of books on how to make a marriage work. There are not a lot of books that are specifically on setting healthy boundaries in a very strategic way, giving specific examples just like we have in the business world. I think a lot of the examples from the business world are quite applicable in the marriage world.

Although, one of the differences that I think is important to point out, and another consideration for families and couples that have, at least, one entrepreneur in the family, is that entrepreneurship and business in general is more of a competition against competitors or the marketplace. You are trying to make money, ultimately, or you're

trying to have a non-profit that has a good outcome whereas in a relationship, you're trying to make sure both boats float. You're trying to make sure that everyone gets their needs and wants met and you're trying to support each other.

I would argue that entrepreneurship can learn something from marriage counseling. That in entrepreneurship, what we are seeing is that companies that play nicely with others, that want to be part of the common good and contribute to the common good, actually end up doing better. When they drop that machismo attitude of killing the competition, which was so prevalent in the '80s and early '90s. That's setting boundaries.

Lee: You've talked about setting boundaries. You've talked about execution. You've talked about communication. I know there are five elements to this thing. What are the others?

Rob: One of the ways in which a couple, even a family, can set a boundary, and I brought this out as a separate item because it's so significant, is creating and maintaining a plan. This is one of the very specific things that any couple or family can do, and I recommend it to 100 percent of everyone that I work with. We have plans for business. We have return on investment, we have budgeting and we guess how much our revenues are going to be each month of the next five years. We try to remove risk as much as possible. Yet in families, especially with marriages, we don't do that. We don't sit down with a plan each month and review what money is coming in, what money is going out, and what are some of the big things that are on the horizon.

For instance, one of the things we do in our family, is we have a monthly meeting. This is part of me practicing what I preach. At that monthly meeting, before we even meet, my wife and I exchange emails about agenda items for that meeting. Now, it's not the dorky version of a meeting where we have a boardroom table and someone's taking notes and identifying the time and we're operating on Robert's Rules or something. But we have a basic framework, which is what do we need to cover? We have about an hour. We need to identify what money is coming in, what are some of the big expenses coming up, and then what are some of the big movements that are going to impact our relationship.

For instance, we have just recently wrapped up selling our house out of the area that we were renting out for quite a long time. It was not only a financial issue, it was also a logistics issue. What do we do with the stuff that's still in there? We still had a tenant in there. There were so many moving parts that were beyond just money. That was something that we had talked about months ago. Now, as soon as the process was engaged, as soon as the house is on the market and we had people walking through there looking at it, we were not sweating the details because we had already worked them out.

Same thing with budgeting. If I'm working with a family and they say, "We make plenty of money. We don't have to worry about expenses." Well, it's interesting because over the last few years, that conversation in a lot of households has changed in a way that families did not expect. I know families that were making, let's say, a net income of \$300,000 a

year. That's a pretty decent income for a lot of people. What happens when the major breadwinner, their company just completely shuts down?

Let's say that they're providing some sort of online application that is geared toward high end consumers and then all of a sudden, the marketplace dries up? They go from making \$300,000 a year to, let's say, \$50,000 a year. That's just not going to work well if they have a mortgage of \$10,000 per month. So planning and looking at things as far into the future as possible, but also being very strategic and specific about what's happening for the next month. Do we have a wedding to go to in Hawaii?

Lee: If you're good at planning for your business, it makes sense that you'll be good at working together on a plan at home. So what's the fifth element in keeping this marriage working? What's the fifth essential element?

Rob: One of the other major things, and this ties into boundaries as well, I brought this out specifically because of how important it is. This gets a lot of people into trouble is defining roles. We make so many assumptions in relationships. Yet in the business world, especially when we own a company or we are a partner in a company, even if we're funding a company - we're an investor - the roles are so specific, they're so spelled out. That's what's called a job description or a contract. In a relationship, things can be so much messier unless we think about it from a business perspective. "Oh, gosh. Here are all the tasks that need to be completed to make our marriage work. We have to have someone pay the bills. We have to have someone make money. Someone has to take the trash out, do the dishes."

One of the tasks that I work on, especially with couples, is listing out in a non-judgmental way all the tasks - all of the tasks - that make their marriage work, their family work and their lives work. We put things on there, such as boat racing. We put things on there like mountain biking. Those are tasks that need to be completed for the health of the individual or the marriage or the entire family. Then what we do is we take those, and we literally cut them out from the paper that we wrote them on, and we put them in front of the people that are responsible for those tasks.

One of the examples is when there are kids involved. Kids, it's not like the 1890s. We're not going to send them to a factory to make clothing, although some parents may like that idea. What they are responsible is going to school and getting an education. We put in front of them homework, attending school and complying with regulations and expectations of the school. That's the job description of the kid, as well as chores around the house. There is nothing in there that says iPad use or playing with the Xbox. Those are rewards and that's how they should be categorized. Being very specific in defining roles is one of the essential elements that I think is missing from marriage but in spades in the business world. I think both sides can benefit from that.

Lee: I love it. I really think your ideas are terrific. They really help somebody, coming from that business world, coming from that entrepreneurial mentality, to have a framework for looking at their relationship and making it successful. I think that's terrific.

We've covered a lot of ground today. These five elements really do sort of encompass every aspect of the marriage. Any other final words of wisdom or tips for making the marriage work for the average entrepreneur?

Rob: You can't ask a therapist if they have any advice or wisdom because, of course, they're going to take advantage of that. I wouldn't say that it's wisdom, it is experience, from my humble experience, my humble perspective. This is going to fly in the face of convention for therapists and psychologists, but not every marriage that has conflicts needs a counselor. They don't have to be in front of someone to work stuff out. They don't need to hire me. They don't need to hire all the other fantastic individuals that you've interviewed previously to me. It's not always necessary. Sometimes, it can be unhealthy. Sometimes we need to go through conflict. Sometimes, things need to get really bumpy and rocky and we need to keep it in-house. We need to work through it. We need to exercise that muscle and figure out how to get through this without support of others.

What's happening often in our society is kids are leaving home later and later. They are remaining dependent on their parents and families longer and longer. Therefore, they're not developing the skills that an older generation developed, which is, basically, getting our butt kicked around by the world and having to work through problems without professionals acting as a safety net. I encourage a lot of families, and this is bizarre advice that I give them, don't come see me right away. Don't do it. Really work through stuff. When you get to the point where, "Wow, we tried. We slowed things down. We tried to exercise our verbal muscles. We tried to really work on the relationship in ways that came intuitive to us and it's just not working", then come back to me. I don't want people to be lazy. I want people to exercise, and I want them to do whatever they can with what they have first.

Lee: Two hundred twelve episodes in, and that's the first time we've heard that advice not to rush to see the counselor. That's terrific. That's a very interesting perspective. Rob, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Rob: Lee, it's been my pleasure, and it's been a lot of fun talking with you.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about Rob Danzman and his practice, Fonhill Counseling in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, visit their website at fonhillcounseling.com. I'll put a link to that right here on the show notes on the website. You can also call the office at (919) 351-5838. They've got a lot of interesting information on the website, including information about upcoming events that you might find particularly helpful. Thank you so much for listening in today, for joining us and for being here. I hope you'll join us again next week. If you'd like more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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