

SMALL BUSINESS

SHIFTING CAREERS

Like Marriage, Business Takes Work

By MARCI ALBOHER

AFTER about nine years together, Marcia Mulé and Bryan Scott noticed that a bit of the thrill in their relationship had worn off. In fact, they had some issues that were getting in the way of moving forward. So they decided to seek help.

Ms. Mulé and Mr. Scott are not partners in marriage, but partners in Picture This Television, an Emmy award-winning television production company. And their help came from a variation on the couple's counselor: the business therapist.

Whether they call themselves coaches, consultants, trainers or therapists, those who work with business partners describe their work in much the same way marriage counselors do. They say that working on a partner relationship goes a long way toward creating a successful business marriage. And while many advisers have been quietly counseling business partners for years, the partners are talking more openly now about the work they do to stay together.

"Partnerships have such high failure rates," said Kathi Elster, who with Katherine Crowley runs the consulting firm K



MARKO GEORGEV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Marcia Mulé and Bryan Scott, left, hired a therapist to help their partnership; Richard Jepsen, above left, and Anthony Sandberg, right, met with Larry Ledgerwood.

Squared Enterprises and is co-author of the book, "Working With You Is Killing Me." "We like to work with them before they go into partnership to make sure they should be doing it. Many people partner because they don't want to do it alone, and that's just not a good enough reason."

Ms. Mulé said that when she and Mr. Scott turned to Ms. Elster and Ms. Crowley for help, the sessions "became the safe haven for us." She added: "We realize that if we are not strong, our company won't be strong. As we stumble, they help us get up again."

The two recently brought in a



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third partner and are now involving her in the process as well.

Like couples who have improved their relationship with therapy, business partners who have had success with coaching or mediation swear that they would never again build a partnership without first going through some kind of process

with a potential partner. They often say they do not make a move without first consulting the coach, who can sound like another person in the partnership.

The catalyst for bringing in an outsider usually appears in the form of a business obstacle rather than an interpersonal one. That was the case for Danielle

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Walsmith, Lauren Tarne and Limor Gallo, three friends who founded Sweet Talk Public Relations in Los Angeles.

About six months into the business, the women ran into some trouble. They had started their company with one major client, and when that work came to an end, they were at a loss as to how to find new business.

When another entrepreneur suggested the partners talk to a career coach about the challenges in their business, Ms. Tarne immediately thought of Maggie Mistal, who had a radio show about careers on the Martha Stewart channel of Sirius Satellite Radio. "I listened to Maggie and thought she had such great insights," Ms. Tarne said.

The three women started meeting with Ms. Mistal by con-

More partnerships are hiring coaches to act as relationship therapists.

ference call and within a few meetings realized that they could not tackle their business issues until they handled some interpersonal ones. "It was a lot more complicated because we are all friends," Ms. Tarne said. "We are very direct people, but when it comes to each other, we were walking on eggshells."

One issue the three women were unable to talk about was how they were going to manage the maternity leave of Ms. Gallo, who was nearing the end of her pregnancy during the time they did their coaching.

At their sessions with Ms. Mistal, they identified who was good at various aspects of the business and made some progress on defining their individual roles within the company.

"It really helped our confidence as entrepreneurs to be able to say it is O.K. to be strong in some areas but not in others. Even that it is O.K. to fail with some clients and have successes with others," Ms. Walsmith said. "Through the coaching, we gained a better understanding of what we really wanted to be doing in the business and in our lives."

After about 10 sessions with Ms. Mistal, the women are now revisiting their goals for the business. Ms. Tarne and Ms. Walsmith are continuing on, albeit with a different business model. Ms. Gallo, who recently gave birth to her first child, will not be returning to the company when she is ready to go back to work.

"Before I could work 15-hour days," she said. "I just didn't realize, until my son was born, how much motherhood takes from you."

All three women say that their friendship has endured even though the business is not going forward as planned. "I'm taking a step back to refigure out my own career, as is Sweet Talk," Ms. Gallo said. "Yet we can still ask each other for help. We want each other to succeed."

Anthony Sandberg and Richard Jepsen, partners in OSCS Sailing School in San Francisco, say that working with Larry Ledgerwood, a business trainer, is one of the main reasons their partnership is still thriving after 28 years. They say Mr. Ledgerwood has taught them to better understand themselves and their individual styles of communication, which has transformed the style of their meetings.

"Larry initiates conversations and makes it so comfortable for us to say more," Mr. Sandberg said. "There used to be a problem and we would jump to find a solution. We now make sure to establish some kind of rapport first, by talking about what is going on in our lives, clearing the unresolved energy, and making sure we are totally present. If that is not cleared up, who knows what you are dealing with."

Mr. Ledgerwood also encouraged the two to clearly define their roles in the business so that it was clear who is making the final decision on any particular kind of issue.

The marriage analogy is never far away in discussions about relationships between business partners.

Mr. Sandberg says he believes his marriage might have survived had he and his former wife done the kind of intensive counseling he and Mr. Jepsen have done with Mr. Ledgerwood. "I look at young folks in love and suggest that they go get some counseling, review their values, and really get to know the other person," Mr. Sandberg said.

Mr. Jepsen said that one reason he and Mr. Sandberg have been partners for 28 years "is that we share the same values and view of the world." But, he added, "there are always going to be temperamental quirks, and those are manageable with the right coaching."

The two men recently grappled with a dire business challenge, the oil spill that temporarily halted all sailing in San Francisco Bay and closed their marina for 10 days.

"We had to make big decisions and plan for what would happen if we had to close for several months," Mr. Sandberg said. "And we met with Larry to move the conversation along."