
Couples in Business Together

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Although romantic partners who are married or in a married-like relationship is a common form of family business ownership or management, these couples are often overlooked in the literature on family businesses. In this article, we emphasize the ways in which couples in business together are defined. Tips for professionals consulting with these businesses are also provided.

Copreneurs

Barnett & Barnett coined the term “*copreneurs*” as entrepreneurial couples who share ownership of, commitment to, and responsibility for a business (Barnett & Barnett, 1988). The term has been adopted by numerous authors. Being involved in a romantic relationship and characteristics such as shared vision, trust and common goals often delineate copreneurships. Marshack (1998) explained that copreneurs are dual-career couples who share an entrepreneurial venture, while Machek, Kolouchov & Hnilica (2016) specify that copreneurships are couples who own and manage a business together. In a typology of spousal styles amongst a sample of family business CEOs, Poza and Messer (2001) observed that spouses may be owners, managers or have no formal role in the business, and that roles may change over time throughout the family business lifecycle. They viewed the copreneur or business partner spouse as being critical to the business with a high level of engagement and responsibility.

Tompson and Tompson (2000) noted that copreneurial couples are striving to concurrently manage a business and personal relationship. The intertwined nature of their personal and professional lives may create unique challenges and benefits (see Lee, Kelley, Wiatt & Marshall, 2023 for review). Emotional ties, stability, and trust (de Bruin & Lewis, 2004), and a sense of psychological commitment to the business (El Shoubaki et al., 2022) are qualities associated with copreneurial businesses. Furthermore, there is evidence that spouses may self-select into copreneurial business structures depending on the level of satisfaction they feel in their interpersonal relationships (McDonald, Marshall and Delgado, 2017). Copreneurs may also be more common in certain industries. McDonald et al., (2017) report that agricultural family businesses were more likely to be copreneurial than non-farm family businesses. Oftentimes, the division of labor in copreneurial couples is specialized. Each person brings unique skills and qualifications to the business, and they are complimentary. It’s also not unusual for one or both members of the couple to have employment outside the family business, either full- or part-time for a variety of reasons. They may, for example, want to retain income or benefits until the copreneurial venture is launched or stable, or they may have a passion for the non-family business work and are willing to split their time.

Couple Businesses

In their early work on copreneurial couples, using data from the first two waves of the National Family Business Panel (Winter, Fitzgerald, Heck, Haynes & Danes, 1998; Winter, Danes, Koh, Fredricks & Paul, 2004), Muske and Fitzgerald (2002; 2006) discovered that although it was common for both members of a couple who owned or managed a family business to be working in the business based on the number of hours each was contributing to the business, the contributions of the spouse or partner were not always acknowledged or recognized by the business manager, and that several partners were not key decision-makers in the business. These couples were excluded from their analyses of copreneurs, but the findings call attention to the need to study couples who work together in businesses where both spouses are not key decision-makers. Moreover, it supports the need for additional research on gender and power dynamics within business-owning couples (see El Shoubaki et al., 2022 on directions for future research), and illustrates that data collection from both partners in couple businesses should be obtained to better understand the dynamics of how these businesses and families operate (Amarapurkar & Danes, 2005; Lee et al., 2023).

Understanding the research on copreneurs and couples in business together can be confusing. The findings may be inconsistent because the ways in which the businesses were defined has varied. Researchers should continue to share their definitions and interpretations while moving towards commonly accepted descriptions of what it means to be a couple running a business together, and whether they are copreneurial or not.

In working with copreneurial or couple businesses, it's important for practitioners to understand how the couple perceives their relationship, ownership of the business, and managerial practices within the business and the family. For example, are both partners considered to be critical to the operation of the business? Do both partners consider each other's contributions to the business? Do the spouses bring unique but complimentary skills to the business? Are important decisions made jointly, or is one person the main decision-maker? How does the couple approach the interface between and family and business in terms of work-life balance, adjustment strategies during demanding times, or in planning the succession of the business? Understanding how their business is structured and how the couple functions in both the business and the family can help professionals, and the couple themselves, determine the best ways to navigate opportunities for change and growth.

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PIFB provides multi-generational family businesses with research-based business management resources aimed at improving personal leadership performance and driving operational growth. Our ambition is to prepare family business owners, managers, and stakeholders (including non-owner spouses and future owners) to be effective stewards of their family enterprises.

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