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Features

Business can be a marriage of minds; How do partners in commerce maintain their relationships, asks Carly Chynoweth

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Stop sniggering for a second about David Cameron and Nick Clegg's civil partnership and you may find that their relationship holds some valuable lessons for business leaders who want to work together.

"An effective partnership is about a shared relationship and common goals," said Nigel Cutts, a leadership consultant and author of *Love at Work*. "You need to be there for each other and support each other."

Be aware, though, that most small businesses start as partnerships but break down within a year, he warned.

"A lot of the time people know each other from their existing employer, but, as with a marriage, you don't really know someone until you live with them. As an entrepreneur you don't have the support of IT people, managers and so on. That's when you begin to find out what someone is like."

Not that being unlike is a bad thing. Few people who knew Peter Hargreaves and Stephen Lansdown in 1981 at the outset of their partnership that created a £1.7 billion financial-services giant thought the pairing made sense.

"People thought it would not work because we took very different approaches to things," said Lansdown. "Peter is outspoken, gets his point of view across and gets heard in negotiations, whereas I keep to myself and let results speak for themselves."

However, these complementary characteristics strengthen the partnership: Hargreaves pulls Lansdown out of any lethargy, while Lansdown can restrain his partner if he starts to get carried away.

"Another thing is that he does all the things I hate doing and I do all the things he hates," added Hargreaves.

What makes it work, they agree, is that they have the same attitude to the business: look after clients and the results will come. And, critically, they are equally debtaverse.

"It's like in a marriage," said Hargreaves. "If one watches the cash and the other is a spendthrift the relationship will be strained."

Find out where you and your potential partner stand on these issues before setting up shop, said John Mullins, an associate professor at London Business School and author of *The New Business Road Test*.

"You will not know at the outset what shape the business will eventually take, so you need to have a common vision."

It is also a good idea to sign a pre-nuptial agreement detailing what will happen if one or both partners want to leave. "Over time the goals of the partners will probably diverge and, if that happens, it is better to part as friends," said Mullins.

Dave Courteen and Steve Taylor didn't have a pre-nup when they set up Fitness Express, the fitness centre management company they founded, sold and then repurchased, but were determined to put their friendship above all else.

"We started the business with very clear parameters: the first rule was that if the business threatened

the friendship, the business would go," said Courteen. He believes that a strong personal relationship is more important than any formal agreement. "You need to be able to trust the other person to get on with their thing while you get on with yours and know that it's all working towards a common goal."

And shared goals require shared decisions, no matter the arguments that went into reaching them. Courteen and Taylor have some very vigorous discussions about the pros and cons of various ideas, but once the decision is made it becomes a joint decision — regardless of who originally proposed the idea.

"There can be no recriminations later where one of us says 'your decision to do X was a bad idea'," said Courteen.

Hargreaves and Lansdown take a similar approach: "One of the things we agreed early on was that if one of us doesn't agree with something, neither of us does it," said Lansdown.

They also make the effort to be open with one another rather than keeping any discontent bottled up — something Cameron and Clegg could learn from, said Hargreaves.

"Be truthful with each other," he added. "Any deception, anything that's covered up, any time you lie will damage the relationship. If you make a mistake or have a concern, raise it with the other person. Don't bury it."

Double act: Peter Hargreaves, left, and Stephen Lansdown, a team for 29 years

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