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Establishing boundaries is key to success

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Working with one's spouse can result in disaster or triumph. The key to coming out on top, experts say, is to develop boundaries.

"If we take (problems) with us when we go home, we're violating a boundary we desperately need to have," said Ernie Doud, president of Doud Hausner & Associates, a Glendale, Calif.-based family business consulting group. "The business would really mess with our personal lives."

Couples must develop a way to leave disagreements where they belong, be it at home or at the office, Doud said. How that occurs is up to them.

For two of his clients, the goal was accomplished by writing down problems on a piece of paper and putting it in a box to be opened the next day. They kept a box at work for work issues and another at home, strictly for home issues. The symbolism of the gesture helped them keep their professional and personal lives separate.

"It may sound corny, but it worked for them," he said. "Every married couple who is working together needs to find their own way to create a boundary and to honor it."

Joseph Astrachan, executive director of the Cox Family Enterprise Center at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, agrees on the importance of rules.

He said there are two types of couples. The first are great communicators who see eye-to-eye on most everything. These people need to transfer these qualities to their work life, he said. They must also identify a preconceived mechanism to resolve road blocks, and default to that method when needed.

The other, more traditional couple, are more prone to having differences. These people should be more careful, Astrachan said. They need to decide who will make what decisions -- be it in marketing, customers, or finances -- and stick to it. If needed, he said they can have a third party help resolve their differences, he added.

"Know who makes what decisions," he said. "Have a break down, then don't cross those lines. Don't mess in each other's territory."

Doud and Astrachan agree that working with a spouse can be rewarding, but it comes with risk. As long as people develop boundaries and strategies for resolving problems, they're more apt to gain success in the long run.

"If you mess up in one sphere, it messes up all your spheres," Astrachan said. "It ups the risk of catastrophic relationship failure."