

Working Life Couples

Good Divorce, Good Business

Why more husband-and-wife teams keep working together after they split

THREE YEARS AGO, Elaine and Michael Honig celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary in a \$1,550 suite at New York City's Four Seasons hotel. Sprawled on the Rivolta linens, they drank French champagne and ate chocolate-covered strawberries. The Honigs had started their marriage making sales calls for their wine business in a VW diesel that lacked both air conditioning and an operable passenger door. Food was Taco Bell burritos. Lodging was often a \$52-a-night dive with no sheets. So a weekend ensconced in the I.M. Pei-designed aerie—with its silk-padded walls, remote-control blinds, and a deep-soak, fills-in-60-seconds tub—should have been the ultimate romantic restorative. Except that, says Elaine, "I felt like I was lying next to my brother. Or my cousin."

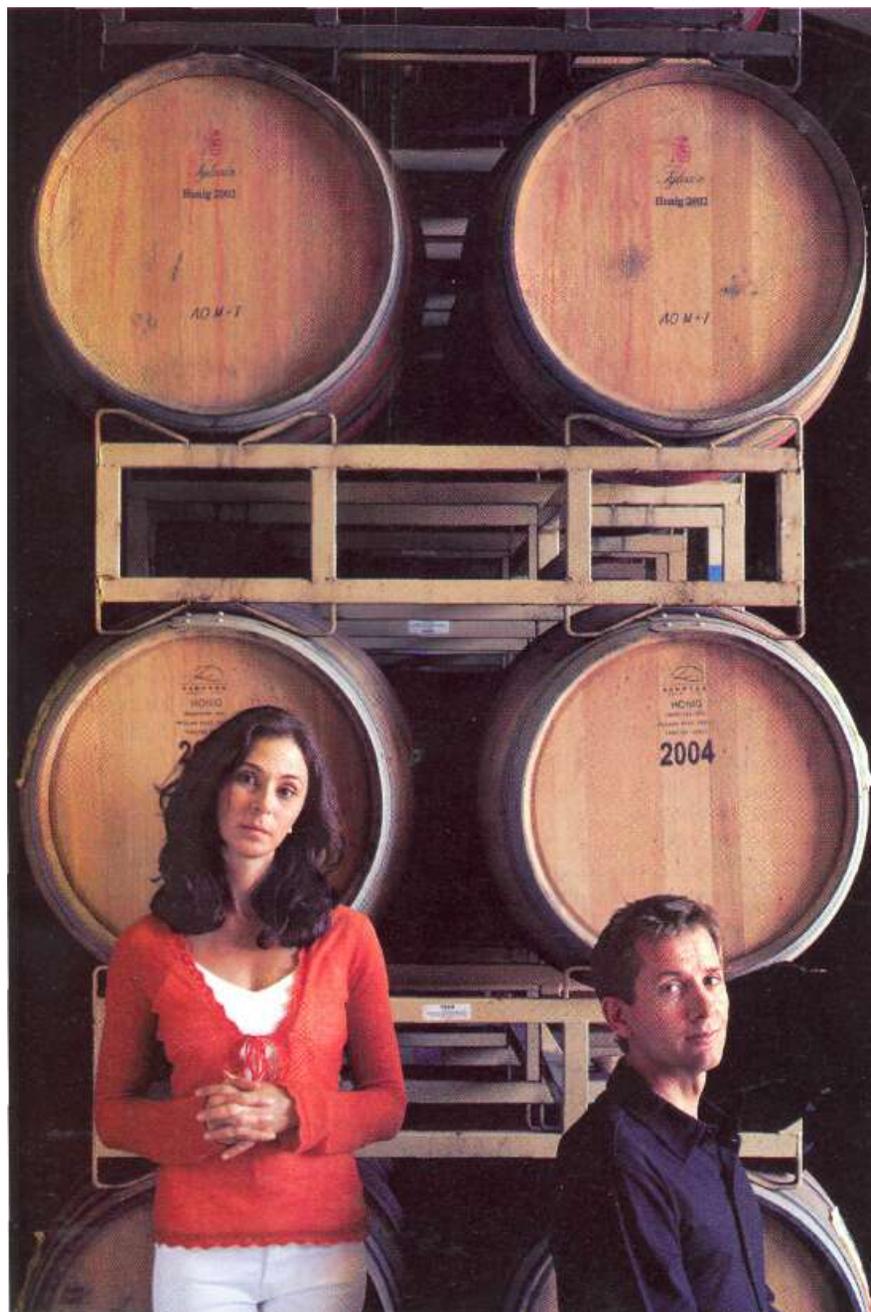
The Honigs, with their Honig Vineyard & Winery, were one of Napa Valley's golden couples. But privately, the weekend of anniversary luxe was a marital Hail Mary. Elaine wanted to slow down and enjoy their award-winning sauvignon blanc in their recently completed dream manse. Michael preferred to travel 24-7 for business, even making sales calls during the couple's nights out. Elaine wanted emotional intimacy. Michael's cards included notes such as: "Dear Elaine, You're a good egg. Love, Michael." She yearned for a child. For him, the business was the only baby he'd ever need. "It was like she was telling me she wanted me to be taller," says Michael.

BOARDROOM MATCH

SO INSTEAD OF RAISING her glass of aromatic pinot blanc at lunch at Gotham Bar & Grill that weekend, Elaine lowered the boom. "I just don't think this is going to work," she recalls telling Michael. Immediately, she could see he was relieved and right there with her. What surprised her were the first words out of his mouth: "You aren't going to leave the winery, are you?"

Clearly, the Honigs were a team in the boardroom if not the boudoir. Not wanting to dissolve their highly functional business partnership, they did what more and more creative-class couples who work together are doing: They went for the newer, nicer ver-

NAPA PARTNERS sion of divorce -the Elaine and ex, good divorce. Michael, still Just as former jointly run ners have been more Honig Vineyard willing in recent years to remain friends so



they can co-parent their children, more spouses-cum-colleagues are now willing to remain friends so they can stay at the company together. Good divorces are "growing by leaps and bounds," says family attorney Lee S. Rosen of Rosen Law Firm in Raleigh, N.C. Boomers and Gen Xers want none of the ugliness of their parents' *War of the Roses*-style splits. The shifting career climate—in which the threat of a layoff has increased 49% since the 1970s, while the chance of losing health insurance has soared 150%—is also making many more leery about starting a new business or switching companies or careers. Not to mention the fear and loathing that globalization is wreaking among the educated elite. Couple that with the gruesome expense of divorce—and a deeper awareness of its poisonous emotional legacy, especially on children—and it makes sense that many partners and co-workers, well versed in office politics, are attempting to finesse a "get along" breakup.

OFFICE ETIQUETTE

TODAY THERE ARE more than 1.2 million husband-and-wife teams running companies together, according to the National Federation of Independent Business. And a quarter of family businesses experience a divorce. Across the corporate landscape, one study found that 10% of couples who divorce continue working together. That's not surprising given the frequency of workplace romances, with nearly 60% of workers admitting to having had an office relationship, up from 46% two years ago. Babette Chandrasoma, a human resources manager in Austin, Tex., of Eden Prairie (Minn.)-based hearing-aid manufacturer Starkey, met both her current and former husbands at work. In fact, her ex works in a cubicle 20 feet away. "We went through a phase where he would get a letter from a lawyer and would want to talk about things at work," says Chandrasoma, who shares custody of her 11-year-old daughter with him. "We had to make a deal that we wouldn't talk about our personal business at the office."

Collaborative law, a growing legal movement that is shifting marital disputes away from sparring, lawyer-directed affairs to more healing, client-centered ones, is also contributing to the rise of good divorces. Many business people, with their MBA-

honed negotiation skills, are taking it a step further by telling the lawyers to get lost, bringing them in only at the last minute to translate into legalese what they've already agreed to in normal speak. "We settled our divorce in about 10 minutes at dinner at Vico," says Gary S. Goldstein, who runs New York-based

Keevil, owner of Richmond (Va.) landmark eatery, Millie's, says he was utterly crushed when he discovered that his wife was seeing someone else. "At first I thought: 'I can't do this, it's too painful,'" says Keevil. Six years later, they are still working together and sharing profits. Says Paul's ex, Lisa Edwards Keevil: "A

lot of people on the outside are dumbfounded, but to us it seems natural because we are such a good fit in terms of our skills and strengths."

In talking to family lawyers about what kind of couple-colleagues succeed at the new divorce, the Honigs emerge as exemplars. They continue to share the office they had when they were married, which is separated by a sliding glass door. They both live on the 68-acre ranch property (albeit in separate houses), travel to wine shows together, and, when they are in separate cities, talk on the phone an average of four times a day. When Elaine turned 40 last year, Michael threw the party. Elaine brought a date. "Michael and I have always problem-solved really, really well," says Elaine.

Granted, the transition from Mr. and Mrs. to friend and co-worker was traumatic. When they returned from their Four Seasons weekend three years ago with news of their split, they had to face the shock of their 25 employees. To help ease workers' and clients' anxiety, the Honigs lavished praise on one another during meetings. When they did discuss their hurt feelings, they stuck religiously to the marital-counseling script of "when you do _____, I feel _____." Both also erred on the side of generosity and forgiveness rather than suspicion and greed.

A big challenge has been convincing the people they date that their relationship is strictly business. "One guy couldn't believe I wouldn't say anything negative about Michael," says Elaine. Another of her difficulties: Now that she is no longer his wife, would Michael value her? Respect her? "But Michael is always very loyal and incredibly reassuring," says Elaine. "He always tells me: 'You are my co-pilot. And I can't run this business without you.'" ■

-By Michelle Conlin in New York

PLAYBOOK: BEST-PRACTICE IDEAS

The Ex Files

More exes are staying in business or careers together. Some of the more constructive tactics:

APOLOGIZE To one another, co-workers, and employees. Assure all parties that it won't affect work quality and productivity.

COMPARTMENTALIZE At the office, never discuss divorce. Refrain from disparaging one another among associates.

COMPROMISE Negotiate your own settlement together. See what you can give, rather than what you can get. Then let the lawyers be scribes.

PUBLICIZE Let clients hear the news from you. Answer concerns. Provide extra attention and a reassuring front.

Data: BusinessWeek, Divorcemagazine.com

headhunting firm the Whitney Group with his ex-wife, Alicia C. Lazaro. Adds Lazaro: "I had a great divorce. No question about it."

Like many of the good-divorce set, the couple split their assets down the middle, kept their premarital belongings to themselves, and worked out a mutually amicable custody arrangement for their two daughters. Good-divorce couples often also share holidays together. For Thanksgiving, Alicia is joining Gary, their two college-age kids, Gary's current wife, and their eight-year-old son, who calls Alicia "Auntie," on a trip to Marrakesh.

That's not to say the non-acrimonious route works for everyone. To succeed "it means both people have to want it to be handled that way," says Joy Feinberg, a partner at Chicago family law firm Feinberg & Barry. The biggest challenge for couples who want to continue as partners at work, says Feinberg, is overcoming extra-marital affairs. Paul

Many with amicable divorces divide their assets down the middle