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by Amy Jen Su

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According to the latest research from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), nearly half of marriages in the U.S. are composed of dual-career couples. That number rises to 63% in married couples with children. Kids or no kids, the advantages of a dual-career household — including greater financial stability and a chance for both partners to pursue career fulfillment — are significant.

Yet dual-career couples face a unique set of challenges and trade-offs. In my role as an executive coach, it's becoming increasingly common for these clients to seek advice concerning not just the workplace but the home as well. When both you and your partner have busy, demanding careers,

how can you reap the benefits of being a dual-career couple and show up as your best self, at work and at home?

Negotiating whose career takes prominence at any given time, juggling two work schedules and household and family duties, and maintaining healthy boundaries between home life and work life are often the most difficult areas to navigate. While each household is different, the couples I've seen overcome these challenges have developed systems that optimize their time and energy — as a unit. Below are some of the most successful practices my clients have put into practice.

Think of Your Family as a Team

When you have a demanding career, it can be easy to become so wrapped up in your work that your time at home gets shuffled down the priority list. To overcome this, you need to give your family or partner the same level of dedication that you give to your team at work.

Coming up with a name for your home team — or your family — is a fun way to shift your mindset. Doing so can help remind you and your partner that it should never be “my career versus your career.” Rather, you should view yourselves as allies. One leader I worked with and his wife — who also had a successful career — chose the name “Team Quinn” after their family surname. Another couple picked the acronym GBG, which stood for “Go Bernsteins Go.”

These names helped them see each another more fully as partners navigating day-to-day challenges, just as they do with their colleagues at work. Team Quinn began planning a home schedule as a unit — accounting for career demands, the kids' activities, and fun family outings. In doing so, they were able to reduce the resentments that often arise when dual-career couples fail to work together.

Get Comfortable Saying “No”

As your and your partner's careers advance, you may gain more influence and receive an increasing number of requests beyond your day-to-day work responsibilities. You may be invited to attend client dinners, join boards, speak at events, or even become mentors. These activities are often rewarding, but they require time and energy. To maintain a healthy work-life equation, you'll need to get comfortable saying “no.” But knowing when to turn down a request isn't always easy.

One professional I worked with offers an example. She felt an obligation to join her son's school board because she wanted to be involved in supporting his education, and many of her colleagues had done the same for their children. But the more we explored the issue, the more it became clear that taking on this role was more of a “should” than a “want to.” Ultimately, it would tip the scales of what was already a tight situation at home.

My client considered the value-add of her options. She could spend her time outside of work with the parents and teachers on the board, or she could use it for quality time with her son. She and her spouse chose the latter. By having an honest conversation about what was important to them, they

were able to work around their schedules and show up for their son in a way that worked best for the entire family.

To find the work-life equation that supports your best self, you'll need to do the same. Carefully consider the value-add of each request you receive by asking yourself the following questions:

- Is it something for which you can uniquely add value?
- Will you derive value by attending or joining?
- What would be the impact on your spouse and home team?

The reality is, you can't do it all — and neither can your partner. That's why every request you accept should have a significant value-add.

Play to Each Other's Strengths and Interests

With both partners working, staying on top of household and family responsibilities is a continuous struggle. More often than not, you have to be strategic and disciplined about who does what, especially as your work and family roles grow.

Divvying up responsibilities according to each other's strengths and interests can be a lifesaver. One couple I consulted were in constant conflict due to the stresses of juggling household duties. To ease the tension, I had them make a list of their responsibilities — everything from unloading the dishwasher to managing bills to getting their kids to and from extracurriculars. Next, I asked them to categorize each item on the list as “loathe,” “don't mind,” or “enjoy.” The couple was then able to reassign items based on each person's strengths and interest levels, dramatically decreasing tension and maximizing their capacity to be effective and present. If you find that a few items on your own list are important but loathsome to both you and your partner, outsourcing can be a tremendously helpful option.

Schedule Regular “Look-Ahead” Meetings

There will inevitably be times when you and your partner have to negotiate expectations and make decisions about whose career takes the front seat. To do this, dual-career couples need to be in constant communication. A simple solution is to schedule regular look-ahead meetings to plan and set expectations. These meetings are times for open, honest communication, which will help you both stay actively involved in big decisions about career changes, projects, or goals.

Below are a few time frames to follow. Use the ones that work best for you and your partner:

- **Annually:** Once a year, look ahead and block off vacations, school performances, conferences, and other important events you know are coming up.
- **Quarterly/Monthly:** Once a month, plan for upcoming travel, deadlines, or busy work periods.
- **Weekly:** Once a week, discuss your plan for the days ahead to minimize surprises and frustrations.

One of my clients found that a weekly look-ahead meeting was critical for him and his spouse to stay coordinated. Every Sunday morning at breakfast, they pull out their laptops to do a quick scan of the week: who is doing what and who is going where. This helps them stay in sync and share important updates, and it has become a much-anticipated form of quality time.

In addition to keeping you and your partner on the same page, look-aheads are great times to ask each other for support. If you have a critical presentation and need more time to prepare, or if your partner is anticipating an especially busy week, a look-ahead allows you both to plan and prepare. When the unexpected arises, as it inevitably will, you'll already know what's on tap for each other. As a result, you'll be able to more easily pivot and support the spouse who's in crunch time.

Create “Time Zones” and “Home Zones”

Maintaining clear boundaries between work and home can be especially challenging for dual-career couples. Many of my clients experience guilt about what's going on at home while they're at work, and fight the urge to pick up their laptops and complete a work task while they're at home. One way to break this cycle is to create “time zones” and “home zones.”

Time zones are blocks of productive work time. They can also be used to denote when you and your partner will discuss work, rather than letting it leak into every conversation. For example, one professional I coached added the following time zones to her and her spouse's Saturday schedule:

- 9 AM to 10 AM: Have breakfast together, be fully present
- 10 AM to noon: One partner catches up on work (Time zone #1)
- 1 PM to 3 PM: The other partner catches up on work (Time zone #2)
- 3 PM: Have fun with friends or family for the rest of the day

Home zones, on the other hand, are the physical spaces in your house — such as an office or a den — used to get a little extra work done or crank through those emails. Designating certain spaces for work serves as a powerful boundary between work life and home life, and helps reinforce expectations: When a partner is in the home zone, their time and availability are protected, and vice versa.

It's worth remembering that work and home aren't in opposition — they're different aspects of life that constantly inform and influence each other. Succeeding as a dual-career couple in a way that enables both partners to be their best selves requires regularly examining your operating system. By keeping it intentional and updated, you will increase the probability of reaping the many opportunities your situation can bring.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), an executive coaching and leadership development firm. She is the author of the forthcoming book, *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day*, and co-author, with Muriel Maignan Wilkins, of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence*. Follow Amy on twitter [@amyjensu](#).
