

Life-work balance is tough enough for dual-career families, but what about when both spouses are corporate leaders? One couple that made it work shares their secrets for success.

# DOUBLING DOWN

BY ILENE S. GORDON AND BRAM BLUESTEIN

Ilene S. Gordon served as CEO, president and chairman of Ingedion and was the 21st female CEO of a Fortune 500 company. She now serves as an independent director of the board of Lockheed Martin Corporation and International Paper.

Bram Bluestein is founder of Bluestein Associates and a senior advisor at McNally Capital, after a 35-year career as a management consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton, A.T. Kearney and the Boston Consulting Group. Bram retired as a senior partner from both Booz Allen Hamilton and A.T. Kearney.

**C**ouples juggling two careers are now the norm—they make up 60 percent of couples in the U.S., and two-thirds of couples in Canada and the UK. Being the majority, of course, doesn't make it any easier to pull off.

Many are essentially winging it. Especially once they have children, couples often negotiate career decisions and work-life balance in response to short-term pressures rather than stepping back and constructing a sustainable framework for their lives. Some of those decisions cause later regrets, whether one partner or the other gave up too much time with the children or too much lifetime earning power.

Certainly, there is still a lot that companies could do to ease the stresses and burdens of dual-career family life. But couples themselves—especially those, like us, where both partners are in corporate leadership roles—

can also take on some trailblazing responsibility in charting this path, discovering how to maintain a balance that works for them and how to ask for what they need.

To be sure, our exact experience is hardly common—Ilene ultimately became CEO of a Fortune 500 company, and Bram has held senior leadership positions at top consulting firms. The number of women who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies peaked in 2017 at 32, or 6.4 percent. Last year that number dropped by 25 percent, to 24. Women hold only 19.2 percent of board seats at companies in the S&P 500.

But if our exact situation is unusual, the experience of having both partners pursuing high-powered careers, trying to enjoy a successful marriage and also raising a family is not. Some might wonder if that's even possible. Women are usually the ones expected to make trade-offs between career

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and family. Yet clearly, it can be done—we're just one example. We've been married four decades and raised two children.

In our experience, it requires focus, knowing when to be flexible, when to be rigid and what to prioritize. *Chief Executive* asked us to look back over how we managed to successfully navigate marriage, careers and family and share what worked. We hope it helps.

**Marry the right person.** Certainly, this may be easier said than done, but nothing is more vital. The right partner lays the foundation for everything that follows. Spouses must be highly supportive of each other's careers and celebrate each other's successes.

The data overwhelmingly shows that you need to have a supportive partner in order to achieve great success. But finding it on both sides, male and female, is challenging. Especially because a lot of men aren't willing to make trade-offs or sacrifices with their careers to support their spouse's career.

**Shared Values.** Of course, it's crucial to share a set of values and really connect with each other. We first met at work, at Boston Consulting Group (BCG). When Ilene joined in the firm in Boston, Bram was based in South Africa, so we didn't get to know each other until a year later.

The people at BCG who had gotten to know us saw similarities. We were both outgoing, smart, ambitious, very professional—and adventurous. They were placing bets on how long it would take for us to become an item. Once we met, it took all of 30 days before we started going out.

We both grew up in families with strong, successful women and men. Ilene's father was a CPA, and he'd ask Ilene to help him with work he took home. Her mother

instilled the habit of serious planning. She would ask her in January, what are going to do this summer? You can't just sit around for three months. Ilene thought she'd be a high school math teacher, but then she got into MIT, and her father encouraged her to go. At MIT, where she got her degree in mathematics, she met women—fellow students—who became her role models.

Bram's entrepreneurial education started early. His dad was an estate attorney and had a lot of checkbooks because he maintained estate accounts for people. Bram was taught to balance a checkbook, and draw his allowance using one. His grandfather grew vegetables on his property, so Bram would sell tomatoes out of a wagon, going door to door. Bram's mother, meanwhile, was working for the National Opinion Research Center as an interviewer, and project manager.

**Non-competing careers.** It's very important to be able to celebrate each other's success without any jealousy. This is easiest when you don't have competing careers. One approach would be to work in complementary industries, like consulting and the corporate world, which is what we did. Another approach would be to work in completely different professions, so direct competition becomes impossible to gauge—say, business versus medicine or science. In our case, we chose the former, but it was easier not to compete because Bram is five years older, so he was always one level ahead.

**Find a city where both careers can thrive.** When we started dating, BCG was still a small firm with only a few offices. They were encouraging more people to go to Europe, and Bram had just returned from South Africa. So, we both put in for London. They were happy to get anybody who would get on an airplane and sell all their belongings and move there. So, we did. And that's how we ended up in London together.

We've lived in Chicago for decades because it works for us both. It's essential to live somewhere that presents equal opportunities for both partners. You want both careers to thrive. You don't want either career to have to basically sacrifice because of the city in which

you live. There have been times when one of us turned down a promotion that would have meant moving to a smaller city that was lacking in opportunities for the other spouse.

**Build a great support system.** We believe in outsourcing everything you can. Hire lots of help for the kids and household jobs. The choices we made won't be right for everyone, and these days there are many more options available. But we recommend a nanny—we've watched a lot of people struggle with daycare and who's picking the kids up.

Because Bram was a consultant, and always traveling, and Ilene called herself a single mother, she said we need a live-in nanny. That way she never had to worry about being home at 6:00. She could travel. She didn't have to check with anybody. We found someone who lived in Monday through Friday. (A nanny needs weekends off or she'll burn out. Also, we believe you can have only one set of parents at a time, and on the weekends, we were the parents.)

We arranged to have a different sitter on weekends for our date night. She would stay over Friday night to Sunday morning, and also do chores like laundry, so we were free to run around with the kids during the day. Then we were on our own Sunday.

**Establish rules to ensure a work-life balance.** Because Bram was a consultant and always traveling, he'd come home Friday night at 6 p.m., and then he'd say, I have to leave Sunday at 4 p.m. to be at a client meeting Monday morning. Ilene instinctively knew that the family needed 48 hours or

two full days to have a real weekend.

And so we put in this 48-hour rule: On weekends, you had to be home 48 hours before leaving on another business trip. If somebody was close to violating it, you'd have to say to the other person, do you mind? Some of Bram's clients used to set meetings Monday morning at 8:00, which would mean leaving Sunday night instead of catching an early flight Monday.

When they'd ask him to be there for an 8 a.m. meeting, he'd say, "You really don't want to ask me to do that because then I'm going to violate the 48-hour rule," and he'd explain what it stood for. Every one of them would at least say, "I can wait an extra hour, it's not that important." So people respect it if you ask, if you explain it to them.

A lot of people complain about companies, the glass ceiling and the culture. But we were boldly going there. It seems millennials want the companies to create a supportive environment. They don't want to have to ask. We always asked, and everybody was supportive. If it works for the couple, then the company will support it.

Sunday nights became our family meeting nights. Every Sunday we'd meet as a family and go over the plan for the week, who had what conference, who had what project. We'd cook dinner, and we'd all sit down. We'd plan the kids' homework, so they wouldn't end up having a big project due on Monday and start it on Sunday. They had to start it a month before. So we would instill this planning, what are your projects, how are you going to plan for them? Of course, we always had a special dessert. The kids



Family valued: Ilene and Bram on their wedding day, TKYEAR; With their kids, TKNAME and TKNAME, in TK YEAR AND TKYEAR.



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would go through the meeting and then get a cupcake, so they loved it. And that's what they remember from it.

**Advocate for each other and celebrate each other's successes.** This may seem obvious to some, but people frequently overlook it. For example, when we attended each other's business events, we'd assume different personas as appropriate. If Bram was attending one of Ilene's business functions as her husband, he would go as "Mr. Gordon." The idea was that his role was not talking about his work, but about hers; same thing the other way around. It was not about being at the event with each other but for each other—check your ego at the door.

In fact, we were interviewed recently by an ex-McKinsey consultant now working in academia. His wife was also in academia, and she was getting an award. He was going to do some kind of work thing that night. And when he heard this rule, he changed his plan and decided to be there for her instead.

**Take vacations with the kids, someplace where the entire family will have a great time.** We took every one of our vacations with our kids. Occasionally, we went away alone if we had a business meeting, but not on vacation. We loved Club Med for family vacations, because they were pioneers in terms of being kid-friendly and having built-in babysitting. Now many hotels have kids' clubs and such, but back then it set Club Med apart.

**Set a date night and keep it sacred.** This is especially important when a couple is traveling a lot. In 40 years, the number of Saturday nights we've been apart is under ten. Once Bram had to be at a partner meeting in Colorado Springs, and Ilene flew out there,

even though spouses weren't included. Of course, she didn't attend any of the business meetings or functions, but we were together afterwards.

**Communicate often, every day, and set priorities together.** Ilene spent three years based in Paris, so we had to deal with the seven-hour time difference. But we figured out how to touch base about what was happening four or five times a day. Good, frequent communication is a big help for everybody, no matter what you're doing, so you never have to catch up.

In fact, Bram likes to say, never go into a "cold house." He developed this routine when coming home from a business trip. As soon as he landed and climbed into the car, he'd call. We'd get engaged in the conversation, and it made the ride home go faster for him. He'd pull into the driveway as quietly as possible. And then Ilene would ask a question, and Bram would say, do you mind if I come inside and answer that in person? I've been sitting here for 15 minutes. So he'd walk in and we'd have a good laugh. And we'd feel that we had already caught up.

**Never go to bed angry, or until the issues have been addressed, or set a time to address them.** There's always conflict in any relationship. In case of two working spouses, there is more potential for conflict because work-life balance issues can add another layer of disagreements. Until we had all the rules, there was a lot of conflict. So Ilene would say, I know we're angry, let's kiss and go to sleep and we'll figure it out tomorrow. But it was important to acknowledge that there was a conflict, not just go into another room. It gets you to resolve conflict as quickly as possible and not let it linger.

**Never lose your sense of humor.** This is critical for a healthy relationship. There will inevitably be rough times and various family crises, and nothing helps to see each other through these more than humor. Don't take yourself too seriously. You have to be able to poke fun at yourself, and at each other. If you ever lose your sense of humor, then you know you've got to rebalance everything. 