

Are you enjoying success in your career? Now look across the kitchen table. Is he experiencing the same level of success?

If your answers are “yes” and “no” respectively, you may be experiencing some turbulence on the home front. Regardless of whether the two of you made the decision that you will take the lead in the career dance while he takes the lead at home, or if it happened that your career has just outpaced his, navigating that road can be tricky if the expectations are not clear and the lines of communication are not wide open. But take heart. It can be done.

We like to think that women have made much progress in terms of career equality, that you’re just as likely to be the “successful “one in the partnership as he is, and that he, and society, are okay with that. We have come a long way, baby, but expectations of both men and women when it comes to who is and who isn’t “supposed” to be the primary breadwinner can be stuck in June Cleaver-land.

According to Wynn Baldock, PhD, a Cincinnati psychologist who has worked extensively with career and relationship issues, “there still exists the feeling in some circles, expressed or not, that one measure of a man’s success is whether or not his wife “has to work” outside the home”.

The danger with this thinking is that it is not compatible with the new work world reality. Downsizing, job realignment, restructuring and today’s more prevalent attitude of “worker as free agent” vs. a goal of long term employment means that what we once thought of as job security and a traditional career ladder is going the way of the typewriter. It often takes two careers, working in tandem, to make the steep climb up the hill of life successfully. When you get tired, he pedals and vice versa.

In fact, according to 2001 data as reported in CNN/Money, among all couples, wives outearn husbands in 30.7% of households. In addition, according to Women and Company, a division of Citigroup, women control 80% of consumer goods purchases and 40% of households with assets of \$600,000 or more are headed by women.

For some families, the decision to reverse traditional roles evolves as life happens. When Liz and Paul Radke met in Green Bay, Wisconsin in the mid 80’s, Liz was at the beginning of a very successful career with Procter and Gamble. Paul, a self-described hands-on guy, who admittedly did not like his limited college experience, was in a field service role that ended just as Liz saw an opportunity to continue to develop her career at P&G’s headquarters. Over time, with the birth of three children, it made much more sense for Paul to assume the lead in the household duties. He moved into, in his words, the “housedad” role for good when the family moved to Switzerland in 1999 so Liz could gain the international experience seen as necessary for her continued career advancement. The family settled back in the Cincinnati area in 2004, and Paul is completely at ease in his role. Perhaps that is why he says that he rarely if ever gets questions or funny looks when he tells people his job is housedad. He has done projects for people ranging from home improvement to computer repair and finds his skills in high demand.

For other couples, the woman as primary breadwinner happened quite by accident, and the transition has not been as smooth. Perhaps tellingly, no one I talked to who was in this situation was willing to have details of their situations shared, as they were fearful of the impact on their relationship. Amy, who asked that her last name not be used, said that the fact that her scores on the entrance exams for grad school were higher than her physician husband's had been was more than he could take. "He put his foot down and forbade me from going to grad school" she said. "Needless to say, we're divorced" she concluded.

However you have gotten to this place, it can be the right place and a good place for your family with some planning, attention and lots of communication.

"For two career couples, some thoughtful joint career planning is a good place to start" Baldock says. Given that few of us do career planning for ourselves, let alone as a couple, that can present challenges as well as opportunities. Because individual careers ebb and flow, it is likely some good planning can increase the likelihood your individual peaks and valleys can complement each other. "It's all about working together toward mutual goals," Baldock said. "If the relationship is truly a partnership, each partner should feel comfortable letting the other take the lead when his or her skills are in demand, or they are really hitting their stride at work. There will no doubt come a time when the roles will switch, due to economic or health or family needs. Couples need to take a long view of their careers and recognize that it is very difficult for one to stay at the top of his or her career game every day."

If your partner is in "stay at home" role, it always smart for him to keep his skills and market knowledge up to date through part time work, volunteering, or continuing education. You never know when you may need to call on him to contribute financially when your career takes an unexpected turn.

Whatever situation you find yourself in right now, this fast changing world of work guarantees nothing but more change. Planning, communication, and a focus on keeping skills up to date won't stem the tide of change, but are most assuredly the tools that will enable you to meet the challenges head on, and increase your chances of coming through with your career and relationship intact.