

DOES YOUR BUSINESS NEED A THERAPIST?

Business partners can rub each other the wrong way, or argue over their plans for the future. If they can't resolve their differences on their own, some go to a psychotherapist or coach -- including some company owners who need the business equivalent of marital counseling.

"When people are spending eight-plus hours a day together, probably 10, 12 or more, issues are naturally going to arise," says Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist and executive coach in New York.

Many companies hire consultants to help executives learn how to manage employees or streamline procedures. Relationship counseling for businesses is different -- it's about owners learning how to communicate and work together, and understanding the issues getting in their way.

Some business owners consult Alpert when they're in crisis, saying. "We're just not getting along," or "Our business is suffering and we don't know why." Others, Alpert says, sound more like romantic couples: "I feel like my voice isn't being heard. I'm not respected. I don't trust him anymore."

"It's almost as if they were in an unhappy marriage," concurs executive coach Roy Cohen.

Alpert says he's seen an increase in the past few years in the number of business partners who've sought his help. But there's no clear answer on how many overall go for counseling. Many people freely talk about being in therapy or marriage counseling, but are much less likely to reveal they've been in business relationship counseling, Cohen says.

"For some it feels like an indulgence and for some people view it as a sign of weakness," says Cohen, who's based in New York. But, he says, counseling was essential for the business partners who have consulted him.

A look at how relationship counseling has worked out for some owners:

NIPPING PROBLEMS IN THE BUD

Jessica Bridge and Dan Cypress began seeing a psychotherapist six years ago, wanting to be sure their different styles didn't cause problems in the Burlington, Vermont, real estate agency they started 10 years ago.

"Dan and I are the yin and yang of business partners. One can be impulsive and idealistic the other calculated and cautious," says Bridge, co-owner of Element Real Estate. "Sometimes it's challenging to balance these differences."

Cypress comes from a financial background, while Bridge, a former bar owner, has spent more time in customer service.

"It's a marriage of ideas and skills and it kind of made sense to see a marriage counselor," Cypress says.

Both partners thought counseling would help improve their already-good relationship.

"It was helpful to hear (from the therapist), we're different people. We don't have to act the same way," Cypress says.

COMMUNICATION AND STRATEGY PROBLEMS

Stephanie Shyu says she and her business partner collaborated well three years ago in forming AdmitSee, a San Francisco-based company that helps students apply for college and graduate school.

As time went on, they had big differences about the company's long-term strategy and how it should be managed.

"We weren't necessarily yelling and screaming, but I don't think we were talking to each other in a way that was effective, that the other person could hear," Shyu says.

The disagreements began to affect their staff. "It was quite difficult for our team members to follow two founders who were conflicted on what they saw as the next step for the company," Shyu says.

She began working with an executive coach, and after a few months persuaded her partner to join her for a few sessions. "We both wanted to fix it," Shyu says.

Their coach had them work on holding discussions without rancor, and during their sessions the partners would say, "I observe you doing this, this is the impact on me emotionally and this is what I would like to see," Shyu recalls.

But back in the office, the pair fell into their old ways. A month after their last session, they realized the discord stemmed from an irreconcilable disagreement about how to run the business. The partners went their separate ways. They're cordial when they speak. Although counseling didn't save the partnership, it did prove valuable, Shyu says.

"I have adopted the lessons learned to communication company-wide," she says.

TWO PARTNERS, BOTH WANT TO BE THE BOSS

Andrew Legrand and his law partner decided after practicing together for more than a year that they needed to eliminate the friction from their relationship.

"Every time we'd meet, nothing was working right," says Legrand, owner of Spera Law Group in New Orleans.

The attorneys met with a business mediator who was also a psychologist. He put together steps for them to follow to help them understand each other, their styles and their vision and values for the firm. They also had to evaluate their roles and responsibilities.

What the partners learned was that they both wanted to be in charge -- and that wasn't going to work.

"There was nothing wrong going on. It was just a matter of we both wanted something based on our personalities, and we can't do that to each other or ourselves," Legrand says.

The partners ended their joint practice and have little contact now, says Legrand. And he's learned a lesson for any future partnership.

"I want to be sure we're on the same page in terms of styles or values," he says.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

Owners who are also relatives may need help sorting through daily issues like communication and disagreements, as well as monumental events like the transition from one generation to the next. The Dager family that owns Velvet Ice Cream in Utica, Ohio, consulted a business coach as the fourth generation prepared to take over managing the company.

They needed help with decisions like the amount of stock each relative would own, and what their responsibilities would be, says company president Luconda Dager. She and her sister Joanne now run the business; their father, Joe, is the chairman.

The coach "helped us get an outside perspective and challenged us to talk about things we don't normally talk about," Luconda Dager says. When they struggled to find answers, it helped to have a third party guide them, and to encourage them to set aside their emotions as they made their decisions.

After first consulting the coach 10 years ago, the Dagers still see him a few times a year. These days, he often helps them remember that while they're running a business, they need to still enjoy being family.

"He told us, 'Make sure you ask each other about your weekend, and make sure you remain sisters,'" Dager says.