

# **PARTNERing with your spouse/partner during transition**

The transition from demanding career to next season is as much of a change for your spouse/partner as it is for you. For many couples, patterns have developed to accommodate the rigorous and often unpredictable demands of senior positions. Whether your spouse/partner is working or not, this transition offers a unique opportunity to reset and carve a new path together. We find there is no substitute for acknowledging, discussing, and planning through these transitions, together as a couple. The pages that follow offer a framework for such a conversation and articles/reflections that offer some food for thought.

## Transition and Your Spouse/Partner

Spouses/partners have played vital roles throughout the lives and careers of most executives. In a study conducted in 2008, 27 sitting CEOs were asked, *Who do you rely on most as your trusted advisor?* Nearly all responded by saying their most trusted confidant was their spouse. They went on to say they could not have navigated their careers without the full partnership, counsel, and ever-present support of their spouse.

The less-talked-about storyline, however, is the life and role of your spouse, separate from your executive life. Frequently, busy executives are unable to engage as much as they would like in the details of home and family life. Whether both people have been working or just one, the demands on each often necessitate a “divide and conquer” lifestyle.

While your career transition has a huge impact on you, it also has major impact on your spouse and on your lives together. The clarity of purpose, rules of the journey, and destination are all reset with this transition. For some, new fears emerge about how decisions will be made, what life will look like post-transition, how both of you will adjust, and how you will find new rhythms.

The single action found to be most universally helpful is to *talk* about the transition. It is also useful to develop a plan and continually refine that plan. Identify the concerns. Identify the hopes and dreams. Discuss options. Be open when things are working or not working. Keeping the lines of communication wide open is critical to the successful transition of both you and your spouse.

Like many things in life, we have found it helpful to have a structure for conversation about the future to ensure that the dreams and concerns of both of you are considered in the planning phase. We offer the acronym PARTNER as a framework to guide your conversations and early planning efforts.

<b>Priorities</b>	What priorities and goals do we have for this next season?
<b>Alternatives</b>	What alternatives do we have in how we spend our time?
<b>Realities</b>	What current realities/constraints do we have to work within?
<b>Togetherness</b>	What things do we want to achieve together?
<b>Non-togetherness</b>	What things do we wish to pursue independently?
<b>Events and actions</b>	What are our actions/next steps?
<b>Revisiting our plan</b>	When will we revisit our plan to see how we are doing?

## Working Through Your PARTNER Framework

Below is a framework to guide your conversation with your spouse/partner as you assemble a shared vision and plan for your next season. It is helpful to work through the framework independently first, and then discuss it together as you pull together a shared plan.

### Priorities

What are your individual priorities for this next season? What are your priorities as a couple? Write your top-ten list, both individually and as a couple.

### Alternatives

You have considered what you might do in this next phase of your life. What are your ideas? How will you spend your time? Where will you live? To what will you dedicate your time and resources?

### Realities

What current realities/concerns do you have as you enter your next season? What realities must you navigate as you make your plans? Are there constraints you must work with, like aging parents or health concerns? Or that you want to work with, like proximity to children or not-for-profits you have committed to?

*Note: Do not rush through this phase. It is important to understand one another's concerns entering this phase—and to openly acknowledge variables that enable or constrain your options.*

### Togetherness

Some things you will want to do together, whereas other activities you will opt to pursue independently. What activities do you hope to share?

### Non-togetherness

Likewise, what do you see yourselves doing independently?

*Note: Healthy independence is extremely important in this phase of life. You have each carved independent paths, and you need to honor those desires and commitments as well as adding new ones together.*

### Events

What actions or next steps do you need to take in light of what you've discussed/agreed to here?

### Revisiting our plan

When will you revisit what you've discussed/agreed to here, to see if adjustments need to be made?

# Your Unsung Hero



**by Leslie W. Braksick, Ph.D.**  
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In our thoughtful moments, we acknowledge that any victory requires the support of a village. Business (not to mention life!) is a team sport, and every successful leader has a dedicated supporting cast who helps them get there.

Within that amazing cast of supporters, there has been one unsung hero who stood above all others in enabling your success: your “spouse.”

*(I use the term “spouse” and the pronoun “she” simply to spare you the annoyance of constantly seeing “she/he” or “spouse/partner.” But my words apply equally to all spouses and partners, regardless of gender or marital status.)*

## Who Is This Unsung Hero?

Your spouse had to be as strong as an ox, with shoulders broad enough to carry your burdens as well as her own—and your children’s. She demonstrated the flexibility of Gumby, the hospitality knowhow of Martha Stewart, and the smarts of a weekend news anchor. She was expected to be attractive, well-coiffed, and have the stamina of a marathon runner.

When among your team and board members, you expected her publicly to adore each of them equally. Privately, you relied on her impeccable judgment to help shape your own thinking about each of them individually and collectively.

Out of necessity, she was “single parent of the year,” year after year. She was the lone juggler of kids, house maintenance, aging parents, and extended family.

While you were mostly available on the other end of text messages, emails, or cell calls, rarely did you have the bandwidth or flexibility to be the taxi service for doctor’s appointments, the buyer of gifts, the facilitator of car repairs, the cheerleader at soccer games, or the mender of teenage broken hearts.

She managed it all with grace and aplomb, on behalf of you both.

## Celebrating Your Unsung Hero

Your spouse has more than likely been the unequivocal unsung hero in your world. Her duty and service are immensely deserving of recognition and celebration—especially as you transition from your long-standing corporate career to your next season. She has been a tireless hero, without pay, title, or performance review. Thanks and gratitude to her are probably long overdue. So, how can you show your appreciation?

For starters, there is no substitute for words of appreciation. Whether expressed in a letter or card, or even better, shared in personal conversation, there is no close second to a personalized, sincere, thoughtful expression of gratitude. Be specific. Detail your feelings with words and examples. Ensure that the intensity of your words mirrors the intensity of your appreciation for all she has done and sacrificed.

Second, show your appreciation by planning something special that she would love. Just remember the golden rule: reinforcers are determined by the receiver (your spouse), not by the giver (you). So, while you personally may love a “his-and-her big game hunting expedition,” she may prefer a weekend for two in NYC that includes a quiet dinner and a Broadway show.

Make it all about her. Do something that she would find special and memorable, and demonstrate your unwavering

appreciation by giving her top priority. Toast her for all that she has sacrificed in support of your career success.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, devote the time, conversation, and planning for your next season together. Engage her in contemplating and sharing her goals as you envision your own. Pause to honor both of your careers as you sit together to plan what’s next, leaving room for continued, healthy independence.

There should be no greater early transition priority than celebrating the unsung hero in your life, and there is no better way to demonstrate your appreciation for her than engaging her in the process of planning and living into your next season, together.

## Questions to Begin Thinking About with Your Spouse

1. What are your individual, couple, and family goals for your next season?
2. What are the anchor points for your next season (the things around which other choices will revolve)?
3. What have you wished you could do (together or individually) that you have been waiting for this season to pursue?
4. What aspects of your current life do you want to carry into your next season? What patterns do you wish to leave behind?
5. Describe your perfect day as you envision it, in your next season. What would be included? How would your time be allocated?

One of the most important behaviors for couples to practice early and often in next season planning is to both **listen** and **hear** one another’s hearts. It’s never too early to start.

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