

## Character: 7 Ways To Strengthen Your Marriage

*When Bernard Harrison, the renowned zoologist and former CEO of Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, reached the pinnacle of his career, his marriage fell off a cliff. He confessed, "You work Sundays, public holidays, you run the zoo during the day and then at night for the Night Safari. We would hardly see each other. That's how we kind of drifted apart."*

This story of a failed marriage is a typical experience most CEOs can identify with. "Ostensibly successful people, if they do have an Achilles' heel, it is work-life balance," says Michael Jenkins, Asian managing director of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).

MARRIAGE, especially in Asia, is under threat. We must declare war on divorce before it reaches epic proportions.

According to a report "Addressing the Criminogenic Effects of Divorce" by Law Gazette, 2001 in Singapore, about 54 per cent of male and 37 per cent of female juvenile offenders come from divorced parents. Research has also shown that children from such families are likely to fare worse in studies, have a higher truancy rate, greater tendency to drop out, and greater risk of teenage pregnancy and single parenthood.

Is sacrificing time with family necessary to get ahead in your career?

Two studies by CCL have found that executives who have made more time for family and other out-of-work activities are rated higher in work performance by their bosses and colleagues than those pulling all-nighters in the office.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers found that besides the fact that these activities provide the emotional recharge, the skills developed out-of-hours are also transferable to the office.<sup>3</sup>

Also, although many workers try to keep their personal and professional lives separate, a troubled marriage will affect a person's work.

Here are seven ways chief executives can do to strengthen your marriage.

### 1. Re-prioritize your values

Our society values economic and material benefits. I know that most chief executives don't intend to fail in their marriages but the reality of the executive lifestyle really does not believe that marriage and family are priorities. We rather work than go home. We measure priorities by the resources we give to them and by our behaviors and lifestyle. I wonder how our lifestyle would change if we put the family first and give priority to personal and family health.

### 2. Make time and effort for the marriage

Before marriage, couples create and make time for each other in spite of their hectic schedules. After marriage, we see a different story. Building a marital relationship is like riding a bicycle on a slope; you either paddle forward or slide down. There is no stationary position. A do-nothing relationship will not do.

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<sup>1</sup> Voigt, K. (2004). The Work-Life Juggling Act. The Asian Wall Street Journal. July 23 – 25, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Voigt, K. (2004). The Work-Life Juggling Act. The Asian Wall Street Journal. July 23 – 25, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Voigt, K. (2004). The Work-Life Juggling Act. The Asian Wall Street Journal. July 23 – 25, 2004.

### **3. Rekindle and accentuate the good times in marriage**

John Gottman, a marriage therapy expert, expounds on the 5:1 principle<sup>4</sup>. A healthy marriage has five positive moments versus one negative moment. The 5 to 1 ratio is akin to the pH of the soil where a healthy balance of alkalinity and acidity is crucial to fertility. These moments include showing interest by active listening, demonstrating care, being kind, sharing humor and fun times, etc. Positive moments will overcome negative ones.

In fact, he predicts that any marriage that falls below this ratio has a high probability of divorce.

Some negativity can spur a cycle of closeness and even distance apart can renew love and affection. Disagreement and anger are healthy in the long run when you have learned to manage them effectively.

### **4. Continue to encourage work-family balance**

Corporations should continue their efforts to promote family-work life balance. Incentives and recognition should be given to managers with such practices. Encourage a healthy work-family balance environment.

Reduce prolonged over-time work for employees.

Allow time off once-a-month for employees to go home early for family dinner.

Make marital enrichment a core competency of an employee.

Encourage employees to go on marriage enrichment retreats.

Equip and train them with skills in conflict management.

Marital conflicts are inevitable. In fact, according to some studies, 68 per cent of conflicts are unresolvable<sup>5</sup>. Couples must learn to manage conflicts and recover from conflicts effectively.

### **5. Have and encourage annual marital check-ups**

Troubled marriage is like a cancer. Doctors often say there is a cure for cancer, provided it is discovered early. It is true for marriage as well. The sooner a couple recognizes the symptoms of a troubled marriage, the better. There are many marital assessment tools and marriage enrichment retreats available.

In fact, studies show that couples don't seek help until their marriages have turned bad for six years<sup>6</sup>. By then, it may be too late.

### **6. Be careful of workplace romance**

Absence makes the heart grows fonder. It may be truer to say, absence makes the heart wander. Long hours at work, increase in travel, prolonged absence from spouse, and close proximity with associates, clients and secretaries of the opposite sex - these factors can lead to romance between involved parties. Before we know it, an extra-marital affair has started.

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<sup>4</sup> Gottman, J & Gottman, J.W. 2002. Marital Therapy: A Research-Based Approach. Gottman Institute, Seattle, Washington, USA.

<sup>5</sup> Gottman, J & Gottman, J.W. 2002. Marital Therapy: A Research-Based Approach. Gottman Institute, Seattle, Washington, USA.

<sup>6</sup> Gottman, J & Gottman, J.W. 2002. Marital Therapy: A Research-Based Approach. Gottman Institute, Seattle, Washington, USA.

## 7. Be bold: Seek help when necessary

In Singapore, there are three most critical phases in a marriage where the divorce rate is higher: (1) First two years (2) After five-years (3) After twenty years and above. Seek help when necessary. Perhaps, we might want to consider promoting marital counseling and mediation as part and parcel of work/life balance. This will help remove the stigma associated with these therapies. Primarily, the message must get to the men, especially in Asia, where they tend to be more concerned about face-saving.

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Temptation is all around us. Our character will be tested by it. Read it on ***Temptation: The Test of Character***.

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