

When wives run the family business

Couples usually choose the best qualified partner to be the boss

Wayne D. and Susan G. Nichols did what most owners of family businesses do when they decide to incorporate: They named themselves to the top jobs. What is different about the Nichols' case, however, is that Susan, 41, became president of Communico Inc., a passive solar homebuilding company in Santa Fe, N. M., while her husband, Wayne, also 41, became vice-president in charge of marketing.

"She was running the show. She wanted it," says Wayne of the 1975 decision. Adds Susan: "I'm better at being boss than Wayne. He's wonderfully creative, but I'm extremely disciplined."

Both make it clear that Susan runs the \$2 million company, which is now completing 35 passive solar townhouses

business, while her husband, Gerald E. Vincent, 38, is general manager. An electrical contracting business that Vincent ran with a male partner had failed shortly before the couple created Bravince in 1979—one reason Bracy was put in charge. The new company is "a marriage of my administrative abilities and my husband's technical skills," she says.

Like Bravince, most woman-headed family companies are small, in the \$1 million to \$3 million range, although Redken Laboratories Inc., a Los Angeles hair and skin care products company headed by Chairman Paula Kent Meehan, 51, and President John E. Meehan, 54, racks up sales of \$85 million. And most—although obviously not all—couples who run such companies are young enough to have grown up with the feminist movement, so the role change produces less pain than their elders might feel.

"I see a lot more males more willing to say, 'It's a super deal. You take the

In a fair number of cases the wife is chief honcho because it is her company. Helga Howie, 54, for instance, started her high-fashion apparel company as a cottage industry when she crocheted sweaters for San Francisco boutiques back in the 1960s. Now she is president of Helga Howie Inc., with annual sales of \$3 million, and her husband, David, 52, a onetime Fulbright professor and poet who helped form the company in 1968, is secretary-treasurer. They have been married since 1967.

Marrying the boss. In other cases a man may join his wife's company when, in a twist on marrying the boss's daughter, he marries the boss. Last summer, a year after he wed, Chuck Trautner, 45, left his job as a Chicago bank vice-president to join the privately held Communications Planning Corp., which coordinates national and local Yellow Pages advertising for clients. The company had been started in 1976 by Trautner's wife, Sally A. Roach, 35. Roach is president



Teamwork: Helga and David Howie confer at their apparel business; homebuilders Susan and Wayne Nichols check building plans.

near downtown Santa Fe. "I work for her," says Wayne. "I can get my tail kicked if I do something I haven't cleared with her."

Taking the pressure. Role reversal in family-owned businesses such as Communico is becoming more common all the time. A growing number of couples are entering business together—in fields far removed from the mom-and-pop candy store of yesteryear—and, ignoring yesteryear's customs, they typically name the best qualified partner as boss even when the best qualified partner is the wife.

In Detroit, for instance, Sandra R. Bracy, 35, is president of Bravince Electrical Contracting Co., a \$1.2 million

pressure for a while," says Donald J. Jonovic, executive vice-president of the Center for Family Business in Cleveland. Jonovic reports dramatic increases both in the number of couple-run businesses and in the number of wives who hold the top jobs.

The arrangement works, couples stress, because they have different strengths that complement each other. Says Redken's Paula Meehan: "Our interests are split. He is very conservative and a long-range planner. He's very good at management, and I'm terrible at it. I get involved in research and development of new projects and their marketing." Chairman Meehan created the original products sold by the company.

and Trautner executive vice-president.

Apart from ownership and ability, there are practical reasons to name the wife to the top job. Woman-headed companies are eligible for a certain percentage of federal and often state and city contracts. Such programs helped three-year-old Quadra Construction & Design Inc., in St. Paul, to grow to \$1 million in sales last year, although its president, Claudia J. Tischler, 39, bristles at the suggestion that she received the title for that reason.

She and her husband perform different functions, Tischler says. She is primarily a businesswoman with marketing savvy, while her husband, David W. Osterman, 35, Quadra's construction super-

visor, "is probably happiest when he is pounding nails."

Some companies qualify doubly for preferential treatment because their presidents are both women and minority members. "I have to decide before I go in to bid at the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, for example, whether I want to be black or female," says Patricia A. Duncanson, the 30-ish president of Duncanson Electric Co., in Long Island City, N. Y., where her husband, Lionel A. Duncanson, 40, serves as executive vice-president. So far she has failed to win a bid as either—which has not prevented the company from achieving annual sales of more than \$3 million—but she plans to keep on trying.

Protecting egos. Even when the husband headed the family business it was not easy for business couples to balance work and marriage. When the wife is in charge, the task is that much harder. As a result, some women bosses tend to go out of their way to protect their husbands' egos, fearful that an insecure husband will fall by the wayside, either as a business or a marital partner.

"If I had a very fragile ego, I could have been destroyed years ago," comments David Howie. More than one family business headed by a woman has weathered a divorce, and several women-in-charge refused to be interviewed for this article for fear of exacerbating already sensitive situations.

Successful couples agree that clear sailing depends largely on establishing specific territories. "We both live and breathe this business, but as long as our responsibilities are divided, everything is peaceful," says Paula Meehan.

Too much togetherness can be abrasive even with separate tasks, as Roach and Trautner found when they shared the president's spacious office, with its picturesque view of Lake Michigan. Executive Vice-President Trautner moved to his own more modest quarters after his telephone voice drove Roach frantic.

Who's the boss? Marital spats also interfere with business operations. Employees "get nervous and drink a lot of coffee when we're on the outs," says Sallie A. Kennedy, 37, chief executive officer of U. S. Medical Equipment Inc., a \$2 million high-technology company in Houston. "They're always glad when things are settled," says her husband, A. Rodger Kennedy, 40, the company's president.

Business couples also need to make clear to employees just who is boss. Once, when Bracy took over her husband's general manager duties at Bravine Electric in his absence, a worker told her he took orders only from Vincent. "She told him to look at who signs his paycheck," Vincent chuckles. "Then she got rid of him." To forestall future

problems, the couple now interviews prospective employees together.

The Kennedys at U. S. Medical have a similar arrangement. At every interview they make a point of asking the prospective employee how he would like working for a woman. "If he says, 'Oh yes, I'd love working for a woman,' that tells me that he thinks he can maneuver me," says Sallie. "I feel a lot more comfortable if he says something like, 'Yes, I think I'd like it.'"

Business associates, too, occasionally blunder. The president of a bonding company once asked Tischler what kind of financial troubles her husband had encountered that would cause him to "let" her be president. Most associates, how-

'If I say I have to work late tonight, he understands'

ever, accept the situation matter-of-factly. Victor P. Compe, senior vice-president of Scarsdale National Bank & Trust Co., the Duncansons' banker, remarks that the couple's division of titles "doesn't bother me at all." He is much more interested in the company's finances, he says.

In fact, the novelty of the arrangement often has advantages. Says David Oliver Smith, 67, a consultant at Kellner Equipment Co., a \$2 million Pittsburgh petroleum equipment sales and service company headed by his wife, Florence D. Smith, 62: "I could wait in an office for an hour to see somebody, but Little Miss Muffett there would just waltz right in."

In general, business couples are more affected by the attitudes of their families than by those of outsiders. One husband notes that his father regards him as a wimp for working for his wife, and one of the three Nichols boys, whose ages range from 19 to 8, always says that his parents run a homebuilding company, never that his mother runs the company.

Silence at the table. Inevitably, the problem of bringing the business into the home becomes a difficult one. The two Kennedy children hold veto power over business conversations at home, leading their parents to devote the morning's drive to the office to strategy talk. Even without children, the Howies found that their digestions improved after they stopped discussing business at the dinner table.

On balance, the couples say, both business and marriage benefit from their working together. "If I say I have to work late tonight, he understands," says Tischler. Adds Bracy: "At night, if things have gone wrong, we know why we are depressed, and we can cuddle and give each other some support." ■