

It takes two

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TOP: Fiona and Gian Blundo are busy with four girls. **MIDDLE:** Jon Langevad and Ulla Hiltula don't let cheese come between them. **ABOVE:** Dave Gorman and Kate Forster reckon their brand of belly-aching works fine.

An intriguing feature of the new millennium work force is that more couples are choosing to work together. But not all relationships survive it. Lisa Mitchell reports.

Ulla and Jon say the biggest beef so far is cheese. Thea and Gavin are heading from teething problems into the terrible it-takes-two stage. For Fiona and Gian, the business of running a relationship comes third to children and work, while Dave and Kate and Graham and Isabelle have it all sorted. Couples who work together often crash and burn when business muscles in on their blueprint for love, but get the balance right, and there's no stronger combo for success.

In fact, dynamic duos are on the rise, says Chris Dawson, who runs (with Mark Malony) the Business Couples Australia counselling service for entrepreneurial couples. Dawson, a clinical family therapist and social worker, believes the booming cafe culture scene, entrepreneurial dinks, '90s downsizers with fat redundancies, and an influx of "economic migrants" with specialist skills are expanding the small business population.

It's not yet possible to quantify how many of Victoria's registered businesses are run by couples. But the state has upwards of 270,000 small businesses that continue to thrive, according to figures from Consumer and Business Affairs Victoria and Business Access, the small business unit of the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

"Unfortunately, business owners appear to have a mistaken belief that somehow the relationship will hold together and weather the highs and lows of business life," says Dawson.

The truth is that while the official divorce rate in Australia is at 46 per cent, anecdotally, the divorce rate for entrepreneurial couples is much higher.

"As powerful and smart as you may be, your wealth and business success increases when you comprehend the importance of your marriage in the first place," Dawson says.

Too often, having reached the successful heights, or rock bottom, of their business life, entrepreneurial couples stagger and split, says Tom McKaskill, professor of entrepreneurship education at the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship at Swinburne University.

"People's objectives change through their lives. You might both start out trying to build something together, but as you build assets and a family and accumulate wealth, one party might be quite willing to continue in that mode, whereas the other party might say 'We've got what we worked for, let's try to take some of the stress and risk out of it'.

"By the time I got to my early 50s, most of my entrepreneurial colleagues were in their second marriages."

There's a sense of urgency in Fiona and Gian Blundo's voices as we snatch a conversation over the mobile. The 40-year-olds run Decor-It, a function decorating and hire business. Fiona admits that in four years of working together, quality time is lost in the whirlwind of raising four girls, Gian's full-time job and the "spare time" he spends on Decor-It.

Their marriage will survive the gale, they say, because their objective is mutual and solid: to support the family through their business. "I think we're very much in synch with each other," says Fiona. "We know our time will come later."

If they are to succeed in both relationships — marriage and business — couples must find the same level of passion and layered understanding of the business, says Dawson. Unmotivated partners tend to become critical and judgmental of the other's efforts.

Thea has already identified some potential hot spots in her new partnership. Husband Gavin recently joined her successful, previously one-woman, public relations consultancy. But she's had trouble sparking his enthusiasm for making business plans. Neither wants to do the accounting — "all those BAS statements" — and Thea feels stuck in a directorial role. Nor does she want her husband as an employee.

Ulla Hiltula, 46, and Jon Langevad, 55, have worked together in restaurants since they met four years ago and continue to gnaw their only bone — cheese. To serve it with or without crackers? Jon says a definitive "No". Ulla says: "The customer's always right." Otherwise, Riz Bar & Bistro in Fitzroy provides a comfortable lifestyle: they work together 60 hours a week and socialise with dinner guests. Outside hours, they're "eating and drinking buddies", checking out the competition or going for long drives. The definition of labour is simple: he cooks, she attends front of house.

The key to their amiable balance, they say, is a silly sense of humour, mutual discussion of business plans, dealing with conflict the moment it arises, and never going to bed angry. "And mutual respect for what the other one can do well," says Ulla. "I think we both have in common a work ethic."

Unacknowledged power struggles are a classic pitfall, says Dawson. And don't underestimate the power of small gripes to unravel the fabric: barbed personal comments, using intimate knowledge as a weapon, not valuing each other's time or the small jobs done as well as the big. "Problems have to be solved as a team. If you can't work as a team, it will be difficult. You have to encourage each other about how you approach and solve problems."

While Dawson recommends couples adopt multiple personalities to separate their professional selves from the personal, Kate Forster, 32 and Dave Gorman, 37, reckon their brand of belly-aching works fine. The couple run Dogma Productions, a production and design house, have been married for 13 years and working together for eight. With two children and 10 employees, there's no time for civil politicking.

"Kate reacts very emotionally to situations and I'm the opposite, trying to be cool and calm, though not always ... it balances each other out because with emotional stuff, you get it all out and identify things more quickly. With a more controlled approach, you get more logic. By combining those, you work things out more quickly, but at the time, it is sometimes difficult."

They have established boundaries, says Kate, such as no computer work or phone calls at home until the children are in bed, limited shop talk on weekends and separate offices.

"The reason it works is that we have completely different things to do and never tread on each other's toes ... It's also easier for me to see Dave's potential and encourage and nurture it, and for him to see mine," she says. "We learn from each other ... Dave and I are incredible communicators as a couple anyway. I don't think we've ever taken an outside issue to work."

Married or partnered couples make an "unbeatable team" if they are willing to identify and work through the weak links in their business relationship, says Dawson.

"The marriage can provide support and trust, which is rare to find in a commercial partnership. A spouse can give better understanding and trust, and can ride out the rough times together."

And so it was for Isabelle and Graham, after 29 years of marriage, 24 of them spent in small business together. They are still an exception. Isabelle and Graham are calling it quits, but not on their business. Isabelle is moving out of the family home as she and Graham have new romantic partners. Both seem perfectly at ease with this new phase of their lives. Their children have grown up and the business is ticking along just fine. Why ruin it through animosity after all this time?

The downside to a home-based family business, says Isabelle, was the lack of social variety — no work functions or social clubs. But it was the ideal way to raise their children: being self employed meant they were always available. What made it work?

"Both sides have got to be prepared to concede more than what you would normally do under most circumstances," says Graham. "And we're not volatile at all," says Isabelle. "Neither one will provoke the other if one's in a lousy mood. You accept it and go and mutter to yourself in the other room and slam a door or something, rather than have a grudge. That's probably why we've survived so long."

Some names have been changed.

- For more information contact Business Couples Australia on 9489 1010.