

---

# The Connections Between Love and Work



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD

## **Seven lessons about relationships that could save your career.**

*“What happened with me would not have happened without her.” – Warren Buffett, on his late wife Susie*

A promising field of management research explores the role romantic partners play in shaping work outcomes. At INSEAD, for example, Professor Jennifer Petriglieri’s book, [Couples That Work](#), describes what it takes for [dual-career couples](#) to thrive. And in recent [research](#), Professor Winnie Jiang finds that romantic partners who do not sync in terms of the meaning they assign to their work end up struggling more during job transitions and are less satisfied at work.

In my own C-suite seminar at INSEAD, it has always struck me how keen participants are to switch – unprompted – from discussing business to talking about their marital woes. Time and again, I have marvelled at how repetitive certain life patterns are. And how intertwined personal and professional lives are.

When love hurts, it often impairs the ability to commit oneself fully at work. Take Lynn, a VP of a large company\*. She and her lawyer husband liked to torture each other mentally. Both in their early forties, they didn't have children and while he wanted a child, he kept saying that Lynn was probably "too old" now and that he should look for a younger woman. She would retaliate by saying that for all she knew, he would be a terrible dad just like his deadbeat father. Their most heated arguments tended to happen before important meetings, damaging Lynn's ability to concentrate.

Another typical pattern I have seen over the decades is one where executives try to forget how miserable they are at home by throwing themselves into work. Take Ed, a CFO. While many colleagues admired his work ethic - putting in solid 12-hour workdays - few saw how Ed avoided spending any time at home, where his wife was glued to the television, leaving their three children to act out constantly. To cope with the stress, Ed had extramarital affairs in the office, which nearly cost him his job.

## **Know thyself**

After hearing so many regrettable stories, I came to realise how failed relationships can cost the individuals concerned, the organisations they work in and even society as a whole. I have also concluded that a Prince or Princess Charming is as rare as hen's teeth and that the ideal partner is an illusion. All relationships are messy and imperfect, for the simple reason that they involve messy and imperfect people who want different things at different times.

In other words, there is no point trying to look for the fictive Mr or Ms Perfect; instead, we should look for Mr or Ms Good Enough. This doesn't mean settling for whomever comes along. It means that we should know ourselves well enough to figure out what really matters - in the long run. Also, by recognising our own shortcomings, we may grow more tolerant of other people's faults. Beyond these learnings, the following seven lessons have emerged.

## **Lesson 1: When selecting a life partner, realise that great sex isn't enough**

Granted, physical attractiveness is often behind the desire to date someone in the first place. Finding someone attractive and sexy can make for fun times, but alas, long-term commitment, whatever challenges life

throws at you, needs intimacy of a very different order than just desire.

In fact, according to some research, the “infatuation” phase lasts only **up to three years**. What if you only wake up to this fact after you have a hefty mortgage and your first baby? What do you think might happen to your career options then?

## **Lesson 2: Don’t pick a partner to “complete” you or to tame past demons**

If you are feeling incomplete, do not delude yourself that having a partner will solve your problem. Stable, mature relationships require two emotionally well-adjusted individuals who are each a person in their own right. That means two people with their own identity, interests and perspectives, doing things by and for themselves, on their own time.

I have also seen unhappy unions where one partner has an unconscious need to repair an untenable situation they experienced in their childhood. For example, someone raised by an alcoholic mother might be drawn towards an alcoholic partner, compelled by an unconscious desire to “fix” her as a proxy for the mother. However, if you see your partner as some kind of change project, the relationship will inevitably lead to **co-dependency**, bitterness and resentment.

## **Lesson 3: Seek a relationship based on trust and mutual respect**

Most people mention trust in the context of jealousy. Of course, if trust is broken through an affair, it takes quite some time to rebuild it. However, trust goes much deeper than questions of fidelity. It is critical to any relationship, be it in your personal or professional life. Are you confident that your (love or business) partner will hang in there when the going gets tough?

Strong relationships are also built on mutual respect. This implies that you appreciate your partner’s work ethic, creativity, intelligence and core values. Failing mutual respect, each party may start hiding things for fear of criticism, so that secrets become par for the course. This kind of dynamic nearly **sank a giant like Nokia** as managers stayed quiet about the weaknesses of the Symbian operating system. In your personal life, a lack of mutual respect opens the door wide for morale-sapping situations such as infidelity, or a spouse racking up spectacular debt.

## **Lesson 4: Master the art of forgiveness**

As flawed human beings, we all make mistakes. Your spouse will make mistakes too. That is why developing the ability to forgive is critical for lasting relationships. It means letting go of the desire (sometimes construed as the “right”) to punish someone for a perceived offence.

Building a case against the other is a grave error. Once you plant seeds of anger, they can grow into a level of resentment that will break your relationship. Aside from deepening links, forgiveness allows you to move beyond your hurt and guilt, to heal and to grow.

### **Lesson 5: Assess how you deal with the inevitable arguments**

In a couple, both parties must be willing to have uncomfortable conversations and speak up when something bothers them. Whether at home or at work, these meaningful conversations build trust and in turn, intimacy. When things aren’t working well in your relationship, it isn’t enough to talk about it with other people. Talking it out with your partner is most important.

There will be arguments in every relationship. The question is not how you can avoid them, but how you will deal with them when they happen. Resist the urge to be right. Whatever the problem may be, making your partner feel like a loser won’t solve anything.

The goal is constructive communication: no name-calling, no personal criticism, no blame, no contempt and no dragging up earlier fights. There is considerable research, including that of psychologist [John Gottman](#) at the University of Washington, that shows that mishandling of arguments is the surest predictor of divorce.

### **Lesson 6: Strike the right balance in terms of personal space**

Individual space is essential in any relationship. However, some people are afraid to give the other freedom and independence. Often, this derives from insecurity, neediness or a lack of trust. The more uncomfortable you are with your self-worth, the more you may try to control your partner’s behaviour. At work, this shows up in the form of [micro-management](#).

In a relationship, each of you should have your own interests, friends and hobbies. While a degree of overlap is important, having different interests means you will always have something to talk about. Never forget to balance time together with time for yourself.

## Lesson 7: Embrace the fact that you both will change

When you commit yourself to someone, you have no idea who they will be in five or ten years. As time passes, you will both evolve in different and unexpected ways. But whatever those changes turn out to be, always welcome your partner's growth and development. Similarly, you should never cease to work on yourself. The key is to find a way to involve your partner in the process. Even going back to school can trigger **transformation** in ways that a couple must take in stride.

### A great partnership can help you soar in your career

Career trajectories stopped being linear a long time ago. Considering the challenges ahead, you need to find – and to be – a fully supportive life partner. As people follow their dreams and aspirations, their life partner can either be their worst burden or their best support system.

*\* Details have been changed.*

#### Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/connections-between-love-and-work>

---

#### About the author(s)

**Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries** is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.