

3 Leadership Lessons From Bill and Melinda Gates' Divorce

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On Monday, in a tweet heard around the world, the Gates announced they would be divorcing. A shocking announcement for those on the outside who only saw the united, impenetrable front that Bill and Melinda displayed to the world.

Bill and Melinda Gates are one of the most successful couples in history. They grew Microsoft, became billionaires, were philanthropists and advocates for all things good in the world. As their story continues to unfold, there are a few potent leadership lessons to be consumed by those following along with the Gates' story.

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On a personal level, I am incredibly hesitant to write this article as it can be seen as an opportunistic move to capitalize on someone else's misfortune. While I don't know Gates personally, as an entrepreneur I've idolized Bill for many years and feel a connection. I have nothing but respect for the work that the Gates have done through their foundation and I know that no matter how elegantly the marriage ends, hearts are hurting now. My heart hurts along with them.

Define success for yourselves

When a marriage ends it's easy to classify it as a failure. After all, if it hasn't succeeded, it must have failed. At best, this is a lazy analysis.

There is no singular definition of success. What success looks like for one person may be an abject failure for another.

For Bill and Melinda Gates, the success of their marriage is for them to define. Maybe success means having built a happy, stable home for their now-grown children. Or maybe success means having the time freedom to pursue their philanthropic interests as a family.

No matter how the Gates defined the success of their marriage, if they managed to make progress towards their personal desires, then they have succeeded; regardless of how it appears from the outside.

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Leaders would do well to learn this lesson too. As you build your business, the ups and downs will come with every day's work and you may experience others who are quick to label you a failure. If you allow others to define your success (or failure), then expect to feel the soaring highs and crippling lows that come with the accolades or criticisms.

If, on the other hand, you and your team take the time to define success for yourselves then you will be able to ride out those inevitable ups and downs with a sense of confidence, regardless how the setbacks may appear. Success is not determined by public opinion; it's making progress towards a goal based on your own vision and values.

All partnerships evolve

It's a hard realization: all partnerships evolve over time. Sometimes that evolution brings people closer together and sometimes it leads to the very difficult decision of ending the partnership.

At the beginning of any great partnership is purpose – the reason two people or organizations come together in the first place. In the case of romance, that purpose may be love, commitment, or the desire for a lifelong partnership. In the case of business, it could be to bring together complementary skills and experiences in order to accomplish something that would not have been possible on one's own.

Once formed, the partnership hopefully moves the conjoined parties closer to their mutual goals. Ironically, in making progress towards those original goals, it's not uncommon to gain a new perspective that inspires new and loftier goals. Suddenly, the partnership that at first glance provided a measure of satisfaction and fulfillment now seems insufficient.

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It's important to realize and accept that all partnerships evolve. Bill and Melinda formed a partnership for a season. Now, as they look forward to the next season, they're deciding that they're not the right fit.

Might it be difficult to make the decision to walk away from a long-time partner? Sure. Will it be painful? It could be. When the time is right, however, it's important to recognize that partnerships have their season and sometimes they must end, for the sake of both parties.

Honesty is key

Knowing when it's time to unwind yourself from a partnership – whether business or pleasure – can be difficult. Being honest with both people in the relationship is important, but being able to have frank conversations about emotions and expectations is equally as important.

It's a cliché that honesty and clear communication are the best way to build a strong business partnership. It's also true in ending relationships. You might be feeling vulnerable and afraid of how they'll react, but you owe it to yourself and them to have this conversation with honesty and clarity. The truth will come out sooner or later and it's best to own it and be as direct as possible.

The worst possible outcome is to go nuclear by making it personal, going on the attack, and lobbying accusations. On the other hand, tempering your truth because you don't want to hurt or offend the other party can be equally detrimental. The truth always comes out and it's best to be honest as soon as possible so there are no surprises later down the road.

Best practice is to first figure out what you're feeling and label it with words. Get curious and explore the deeper 'why' behind the feeling – what circumstances led you to feel this way? Then, identify what your needs are and communicate them calmly and clearly to your partner.

You may find that your partner simply didn't realize this was an issue and they'll be open to considering your needs. You may also find that you need to make some changes in order for this partnership to work better, or end the relationship altogether.

Regardless of what happens next, if you're able to communicate authentically with honesty and clarity, it will feel much better than lying, staying silent, or acting out passive-

aggressively.

We each have needs and preferences that change throughout the course of our lives and the people who help you fulfill those needs sometimes need a change too. If your partner is not able to meet those needs that are important to you, it might be time for a change.

My heart goes out to the Gates family as they navigate this difficult time and wish them nothing but happiness and success, however they choose to define it, in the days ahead.

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