



The Leadership Ladder

Toxic Assets

March 18, 2009

By **Jean Dowdall**

In an ideal world, your spouse not only loves you but also supports your professional goals both in principle and in behavior. And many of us have the great good fortune to live that ideal — maybe not every day, but pretty close to it.

What about those whose spouses (and I include same-sex couples and unmarried couples when I use this term) don't support them, and what about those whose spouses support them in words but not in deeds, despite their love for each other?

There are many examples of how a spouse can harm a career; some will be familiar from press reports, but others may be quite surprising. These are all true life examples from my observations as a presidential search consultant and the observations of my colleagues (especially Lucy Leske and Dennis Barden).

I have to warn you that this is going to be one of those columns that leaves many unanswered questions. My intent is to identify the problem and see what solutions others might have. I'll focus on presidents and first ladies/first gentlemen because the spouse's potential impact is more prominent there, but similar situations occur in a variety of institutional leadership roles.

Let me offer examples of times when spouses turn out to be toxic assets — focusing first on the point of hiring:

- The spouse joins the candidate in the final interview and outshines the candidate, making him or her

appear bland or timid by comparison.

- The spouse attends the final interviews and is seen to be old, weary, infirm, etc. — and through “guilt by association” the candidate also appears to be too worn out to get the job.
- The spouse presumptuously takes the attitude of “we already have this job” and offers critiques of how things are currently being handled by the institution.
- The spouse is seeking an academic appointment but in some way alienates what would be the home department. It is important to point out that this problem is sometimes created by the search process in which department members are made to feel that they are being forced to accept the spouse, and/or that this person is less academically qualified than they would normally expect in a colleague.
- The spouse tells the candidate that we will move to this location “over my dead body.” The candidate then withdraws from the search and thus misses a good professional opportunity.

Once the presidential appointment has been made, other problems can develop:

- The spouse becomes overly involved, steps into conversations that are not his or her place, and generally terrorizes the staff. This problem seems

to be most common when the spouse has professional expertise relevant to the university (e.g., advancement, marketing, enrollment), but the spouse can also become excessively involved in any area of university life.

- The spouse behaves badly at social events — boisterous, obnoxious, flirtatious, insulting to major donors, etc. In some cases, alcohol may be involved, but sometimes there is no alcohol — just bad judgment! This pattern takes on a particularly alarming form when the bad behavior occurs in relation to students — e.g., young spouses who treat students as peers and pals.
- The spouse shows a different level of engagement with intellectual or political issues, and the institution reacts badly. Colleges and universities can be unwelcoming to those who don't appear to share their values.
- The spouse is appointed to a faculty or staff position and paid significantly more than others with similar backgrounds, creating waves of resentment that can attach themselves to the president as well as the spouse.
- The spouse is accused of misbehavior in the university-owned president's house, such as use of illegal drugs.

Having said all these things about the unfortunate behavior of spouses, we need to remember of course that the spouse normally has no job description, no title, no compensation and no staff. The expectations for appropriate behavior are murky. And the formal implications for the president are unclear — can a president be fired for the actions of his or her spouse? I suspect that spousal problems underlie some number of presidential departures.

Being a presidential spouse is not easy. As Ron Baenninger pointed out in [his recent *Inside Higher Ed* essay](#), “Presidential spouses, whether male or female, must maintain their self-esteem while playing second fiddle.” Even for someone with a career, that can be challenging. He describes what he takes to be the spouse's assignments, although they are unstated — “Represent her at local functions, ... Having me drive her places, or pick her up — [and] if we are going to a function together I often receive instructions from the back seat: things like ... what conversation topics to fall back on, or which should be avoided. ... Taking care of car matters... Taking and picking up her dry cleaning ... Answering the door graciously, or at least politely.” And there is the essay's theme — “polishing the president's shoes.” A lesser person might feel and even show some irritability at these assignments.

I am the last person to say that even the most toxic spouse should be cast aside in exchange for career success. But we can't all have people like Ron Baenninger for a presidential spouse. It is easy to say that there should be frank and open conversations between the spouses before the presidency is derailed by spousal misbehavior. That can be difficult and painful and perhaps in any case ineffective. And so, as I said, I leave this reflection with the question: What is to be done about a spouse who turns out to be a beloved but toxic asset? Your comments are invited, and observations about turning a bad situation around are especially welcome.

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