

Taking turns at being the boss

Whenever someone says “she wears the pants”, it’s just an instant judgement on what sort of partnership the two people have.

The implication is that the wife leads in every area and the husband is a passive follower. But it is rarely so straightforward.

Often each partner will have a specialty when it comes to assuming leadership in the relationship.

Women tend to run the social life – how often have you heard a husband suggesting that you check with his “social secretary” before confirming an arrangement?

In this era, when many people have complex commitments, it makes sense for one person to keep track of events.

But why does it seem that women are the leaders and men the followers when it comes to social and intimate connections?

The answer lies, at least in part, in our gender conditioning. Women have grown up valuing their social connections and initiating intimate conversations within their friendships.

Once in adult intimate relationships, they are the ones who tend to monitor how much time the couple is spending together and are generally responsible for suggesting a weekend away.

This doesn’t mean men are lazy or uncaring. Traditionally they have come into their own by initiating moves in the financial area and keeping an eye out for the couple’s material well-being.

Husbands have tended to rely on the wife’s greater expertise in monitoring and nurturing the relationship, as well as maintaining its community and extended family connections.

But society is rapidly shifting, so the divisions between who leads and who follows is becoming much less clear-cut.

In relationships that work well, you will often find the roles of leading and following are shared in a balance. You need to have the flexibility to be leader or follower at different times, depending on the needs of the relationship.

If a woman leaves the workforce to care for children, she may be happy to assume most of the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the house as well as the parenting decisions.

But when she goes back to work, the balance often needs renegotiating, so both husband and wife can have an equal say and share the responsibility for domestic and financial affairs.

This transition can be the cause of serious tension. The wife may want her partner to assume more responsibility on the domestic front than when she was a full-time homemaker.

She may want him to initiate household and parenting tasks, whereas he may be willing to help but still sees it as her job.

And though the wife may resent the burden of being in charge, she may have a lot of trouble giving up the captain’s chair.

Give and take is essential or you end up having arguments over trivial things.

Your style of leadership could be an issue here. If you tend to be an authoritarian and not invite consultation, you are likely to provoke a negative reaction. Your partner may agree to do things but never act on them, creating tension on the surface.

The two of you could be getting into an exhausting power struggle rather than renegotiating the power balance. You may need the help of a professional counsellor to get out of the impasse.

Relationships are living, breathing things. They need to evolve as circumstances change.

As a couple, you will need to renegotiate power and control and other core issues several times, depending on your circumstances.

Survival tips

- **It's OK for partners to lead on some issues and follow on others**
- **Our gender conditioning tends to influence the areas of leading and following**
- **We need to renegotiate the issues around leading and following at various life stages**
- **Professional relationship counselling can help work through these tricky transition stages**