

Who Does What at Home? Try Using Business Titles to Divide Chores

Designations like chief operating officer and chief tech officer make it easier to settle on who does what

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Nothing fuels marital conflict like disagreement over household chores. But families can ease the strain by taking a page from the world of business—and using job titles to sum up their areas of responsibility.

In my own marriage, the question of who does what got simpler once we arrived at our own shorthand: My husband is vice president of operations, and I'm vice president of special projects. He's responsible for just about everything that stays the same from day to day (laundry, dish washing, feeding the children) while I'm responsible for everything that requires planning or organizing (vacations, birthday parties, medical appointments).

Dividing our household work has helped reduce our battles over who should do what—as well as reducing the number of tasks that go uncompleted. Even though we've never talked about home renovations, when it came time to replace our front steps, I knew finding a contractor was my job—because it was a nonroutine project. Even though we haven't talked about who will walk our new puppy, I'm not worried about the time commitment—because my husband always steps up for such day-in, day-out tasks.

Nor are we alone in using broad job titles: I've found many people who use the same strategy to organize roles in their marriage. I asked them how they do it and how it's working out. Here are their edited responses.

Luis Giraldo, Vancouver

I'm the chief operating officer, chief technology officer, chief software-update officer and chief fine-print reader.

I look after most things that require “operational” involvement, like bills, contracts, agreements, services, mortgage, banking and the car, as well as planning and maintaining technology, appliances and electronics.

My wife is chief house officer and chief sustenance officer. She ensures our interiors are tastefully executed, that we're not living in one big dust bunny, and that we can still find our son in his room. She looks after our son's school duties and responsibilities, and she's the one who least objects to cooking.

We argue sometimes about my diminished (nonexistent) involvement in some chores like cleaning, laundry, dishes. But we are both aware that whatever it is that needs to get done will get done, and I can't say we've ever had a blowup about those types of things.

David Gartner, San Francisco

I'm chief creative officer, and my wife, Liore, is chief operations officer. We're both co-CEO and director of growth.

Our division of responsibilities started while we were wedding planning. I thrived on developing creative concepts (guest guide, thank-you card design, etc.) while Liore got into the logistics (guest list, transportation, etc.). At a certain point, we talked about playing to our strengths and formalized the process. It's a bit of a right brain/left brain, Kirk/Spock thing.

The division of labor is very clear, as are the things that overlap. For example, when we're taking a road trip, Liore focuses on how it will actually happen, and I take care of how it will feel. So Liore booked the car, and figured out when we'd leave and when we'd pick up the kids from school; I put together a road song mix specific to our route, and looked up good age-appropriate car games for our 3- and 5-year olds.

As co-CEOs, we collaboratively shape the vision of our family, so no major decisions are made alone. This can mean choosing to live a car-free lifestyle in the heart of a big city and taking jobs that give us the flexibility to be involved with our kids. Co-directors of growth is more about how we raise the kids, like deciding where they'll go to school.

Our division of labor is so clear that there's not much space to relax from our given roles. Sometimes, I'll want to take on organizing something but see Liore's already planned it. In turn, Liore will often want to take on more creative projects but fears stepping on my toes.

Sara Lovelady, Ashland, Ore.

I'm the social-engagements coordinator and vice president of life enrichment.

I plan all the weekend family activities and research and plan all the events that could enrich our family on a deeper level. Since our daughter is adopted and was born with one arm, I researched camps for kids with limb differences. I also signed us up for an overnight adoption camp and a weeklong adoptive-families campout.

My fiancé is vice president of household management, which means he takes care of almost all the house things, whether that's shopping and cooking, fixing broken things or taking out the garbage and recycling. And my kid is the house messer, food rejecter and laughter provocateur.

We also have a division of labor for the stuff nobody likes. Dave is doer of unpleasant things, like fetching the suitcase from the shed on a cold winter night, and I am the doer of disgusting things, like cleaning kid butts and cat vomit. It works well because I don't really have a problem doing disgusting things but I dread doing inconvenient things, and he feels the same way in reverse. But the larger truth is, we love each other so much, and we both are constantly pitching

in and helping one another, so we will basically do anything the other asks happily, because our cups are so full.

My daughter says that I'm actually "most boss" and my partner is "helper boss." What that means is that Mama has the most authority over decisions that affect her—like whether she can have a cookie!

Kellie Parker, San Leandro, Calif.

I'm vice president of supply chain, operations and communications.

I'm in charge of thinking ahead and anticipating needs for the family. So I'm in charge of grocery shopping, planning activities and making sure that we have a present for the birthday party next week.

My husband, Bernard Ostil, vice president of engineering and facilities management, is in charge of updating our household technology and fixing most household issues. He also does the yard work, takes out the garbage and that kind of stuff.

Our division grew out of natural affinity. My husband is a software engineer and more knowledgeable about tech than I am; he washes the dishes because he's extra particular about how he wants them done. He also does anything that has to do with heavy lifting or that needs physical strength, as cancer pretty much wiped out my physical energy. I am a planner and I do communications for a living, so I'm happy to plan vacations and meals and make sure that we RSVP to parties. It works because it takes advantage of our individual skills and talents.

Bumps and glitches are usually a result of schedules. For instance, since I'm a Realtor, if I'm doing an open house, I may need him to go to the grocery store, or if I'm home alone when we suddenly have an ant infestation. Communication is key here: I'll make sure he knows which kind of bread or milk I usually get, and he tells me what kind of ant traps to buy.

Barbara Saxberg, Oshawa, Ontario

I'm chief executive, chief financial officer, chief operating officer and chief laundry officer.

I essentially have all the responsibility for running the household: I manage all the finances and arrange for maintenance and repairs. I do all the laundry, although my spouse launders his own clothes. I am responsible for housecleaning. That means I'm the one who has to say, time to clean the house! (And negotiate a time when my spouse, Dan, will share the work, usually after whatever sporting event finishes on TV.)

Dan is chief entertainment officer, chief culinary officer and chief well-being officer in charge of keeping me sane. He does all the cooking. When we first got together, I used to offer to help, but he prefers to work alone in the kitchen. My job is cleanup and dishes. But I don't mind, because I get excellent meals that I don't have to make.

I do get frustrated sometimes, feeling as if I am the one who has to take responsibility for the majority of household management. Sometimes I just wish I didn't have to assign tasks. We're

both adults in our 60s and know what needs doing. And the workload often seems more weighted to me—although to be fair, Dan doesn't see it quite the same way.

Having said that, I am lucky to be with a kind, generous, thoughtful man who would do anything for me. I call him the chief entertainment officer because he makes me laugh. He never takes himself too seriously and refuses to get drawn into unnecessary drama. This is a second marriage for each of us. I was an unhappy person when we met, and he has changed that.

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