

Riding Shotgun

When people close to you make big decisions that affect your life

TEXT BY CHRISTINE MACLEAN ILLUSTRATION BY JASON GREENBERG JANUARY 9, 2008

ONE QUESTION SURVEY

How do you feel about riding shotgun? (Choose one)

- I'm okay at it--but it feels uncomfortable.
- I think I'm good at it, but those close to me might have a different opinion.
- I'm genuinely good at it.
- I'm terrible at it, but at least I know I'm terrible at it!

REACT TO THIS STORY

Agree? Disagree? Stop sounding off to your computer screen! Instead, share your point of view on this subject with our readers.



JUGGLE THIS

TELL A FRIEND

You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

Angela King*, a manager in her mid-thirties, knew that her husband Kevin* was restless in his white-collar job. While it was good in many regards, it hadn't been giving him any personal satisfaction. When Kevin started riding along in the squad car with his police officer brother and asking him questions about the police academy, Angela hoped it didn't mean what she thought it might.

It did. Kevin, a middle-aged father of two, told her he wanted to join the force, and with that, Angela was riding shotgun.

We all end up in the passenger seat at times--spouses change careers, a child selects a college (or not), aging parents who are sound of mind make their own end-of-life decisions that directly affect us. And while it isn't easy to remain supportive without crossing the line and trying to own these decisions, it is possible. Experts say it all comes down to healthy boundaries, understanding where you end and the other party begins. To wit: When you're riding shotgun, it's not about you.

Ken Fish understands that. Five years ago when his wife Diane Mater, a then 37-year-old graphic designer, told him she wanted to go to medical school, he was thrilled for her, even though it meant he'd have to be a stay-at-home parent to their young daughter and they'd be facing some very lean years.

"At the beginning, I was young and naïve and never would have dreamed of telling her no," says Fish, who won the medical school's award for most supportive spouse last year when Mater graduated. "Now I'm less naïve about the sacrifices, but I'd still never dream of telling her no. How can you tell someone they can't go after a dream when they have it in them not just to try but to succeed?"

Some of us can (and do) because we believe we know what's right for the other person. We "know" a daughter would fail at Yale but thrive at Boston College. We "know" a spouse isn't cut out to be a forest ranger (nor do we want to relocate to the Pacific Northwest). Being right is beside the point, however, says Leif Smith, a psychologist and president of Personal Best Consulting in Columbus, Ohio. If you force your agenda, it can alienate that person and put your relationship at risk. "Let's say you are right and you 'win,'" says Smith. "Now the other person is beaten down and has lower self esteem. Is that what you really want? You have to get a wider perspective. It's more important to have happy times than to be right."

I just want what's best for you!

Occasionally we profess to want what's best for the other person when what we really mean is "what I think is best." Missa Murry Eaton, an assistant professor of psychology at Penn State, has been studying parental contingent self worth, which occurs when parents feel so invested in their child that they base their own self worth on their child's accomplishments. She says the question, "Do I want this for myself or for my loved one?" can be difficult to answer given "humans' uncanny ability to hide things from themselves."

Murry Eaton uses herself as an example, telling of the time her daughter, an outstanding trumpet player who seemed to enjoy playing, told her mother she didn't want to play anymore. "She said, 'I think I've been playing trumpet for you and not for me.' I was devastated," Murry Eaton says. "Here I study this topic [professionally] and I never even realized she was sending signals, trying to get it across without being blatant, and I was ignoring them."

Red flags that you've crossed the line from interested to over-invested include feeling an urgency to push your agenda and frequent, emotionally charged arguments about the topic.

The emotional response that's a red flag can also be a clue that some deep-seated need in us has been triggered. "We have the illusion that we have control in life and that there is such a thing as stability," says Ann McKnight, a clinical social worker in Holland, Michigan, and an expert on non-violent communication, a way of strengthening our ability to respond compassionately to others and ourselves. Riding shotgun disturbs that illusion, which gives us an opportunity to face our own fears. McKnight says, "We can ask ourselves, 'What's keeping me from supporting the other person's growth? What's beneath that? Fear I'll starve, die, lose my image of myself?' Once you've gotten in touch with what your trigger is, then you can say to the other person, 'I value your honesty but here's what's going on with me and I would like some consideration.'"

If your relationship with the person is generally healthy, a frank, respectful conversation can follow, during which each party takes the other's fears and desires into consideration.

Agenda-neutral is the goal

While as shotgun rider you have the right to voice your concerns, you also have the obligation to set aside your

agenda. Help the driver think through the decision by offering options and alternatives, e.g., "Here are the three choices you have and let's talk about how each might play out."

Angela didn't want Kevin to become a police officer, and she was very in touch with her trigger. "I was scared for his safety and scared my children would lose their dad," she says. But instead of saying "no way," she kept the conversation going and helped him think through the different scenarios, including the impact police work would have on family life, something they both valued. Perhaps most importantly, she asked him, "Are you doing this because you want to help society or because you want to get out of your current situation?"

The question was one of the things that helped him realize he was doing it for the wrong reasons. Eventually, he found another job that gives him more freedom and control and involves far less desk time, and he's thinking about volunteering in order to meet his need to give back to the community.

Simply listening is critical. Says Smith, "Sometimes the other person just wants the space to discuss these dreams and may not ever intend on fully pursuing them." In other cases, the driver may be checking to see first if you understand the decision is theirs to make and second if you'll support them no matter what they decide.

How to save yourself

If you find that you're trying to wrest control of the steering wheel, it's not too late to gracefully settle back where you belong. Here's how.

Restore the balance to your life. When someone close to you is making a big decision, it's easy to focus on it to the exclusion of everything else until it seems like it is your life, rather than just one aspect of your life. Force yourself to get involved in something else, e.g., a sport or volunteering.

Use your support network. Get together with good friends who will let you vent and process your feelings. "It's normal to be frustrated," Smith says, "but once we process that, we can go back to the relationship in a better frame of mind."

Assume that mistakes will be made. In trying so hard not to make mistakes ourselves and preventing others from making mistakes, we deprive everyone of life's richness. We want quick, definitive answers, so we tend to view things in black and white. In reality, "There's a lot of gray to the scale. That's where all the beautiful intricacies of life hide--in that gray area--but we're afraid of that gray because it's unknown," says Smith. "That's where all the learning and fun are. That's where the growth is."

Finally, trust that everything will work out. If the other party makes a mistake, so what? He (and you) will deal with it and move on, doubtless wiser for the experience. That's life. We humans are remarkably resilient--especially when we feel supported by those along for the ride.

* Names changed.

Over the years, Juggle editor Christine MacLean has found various ways to distract herself while riding shotgun.

REACT TO THIS STORY

Your message

Name (required)

E-mail (required)

Title

Company

Reactions, which may be edited for length, will appear within a few days. Please be respectful of others. Please be brief. Bonus points for making your point *and* making us smile.

Forcing you to leave your e-mail address makes you nervous, right? It's the editor's fault. She wants to be able to contact you if she needs clarification on your reaction.

Send

Reactions to "Riding Shotgun"

I'm riding shotgun right now. My wife left her well-paying IT job to start a wedding cake business. She's much happier, but making no money yet. I feel a lot of pressure to make as much money as possible and am considering going in-house and giving up my design business, if I can find the right opportunity.

Sometimes I resent all the changes to my life forced by her career change. Then I remember to breathe and appreciate all the great things in my life. In the grand scheme it is more important to me that she be happy.

Peter McRae
Owner, McRae Creative

I often use the tactic of letting situations play out before jumping on a decision that I feel is misguided, especially with my husband. I find that if I give validity to his desire to do/buy/change something, he is more receptive to my ideas on the subject. He doesn't catch on that this is what I am doing, and I sometimes feel like I am manipulating him and can play him like a player piano (i.e. with ease!) Is this really better than directly telling him my opinion? It certainly gets me "my way" in the end (as it did for Angela above). He can be brutally honest, and while hurting mine or others' feelings sometimes, he gives excellent advice that actually spurs change more than tip-toeing around issues.

One issue that came up recently in our family was a pregnant 18 year old, who announced her pregnancy and that she was keeping the baby. She had NO WAY to support herself, much less a child, and her parents would not accept it. They told her she would basically be cutting ties with her family if she went through with it. She didn't have it, and broke up with her boyfriend about two months later. She still is not in a position where she's capable of caring for another human

being, and since she's been more independent in the 2 years since this happened (when refusing to go to college seemed like a minor detail!) I think understands this more clearly.

She has recently decided to go back to school, and while I don't know, I think if you asked her she'd be pretty glad that she didn't have the baby and that her parents were as crystal clear about their opinions as they were. It took some time (a couple of months, maybe?) but she is very close with both parents now- far closer than before, though that could just be age. Would it really have been better to ride shotgun to this disaster? It's clearly a more important life event than Yale vs. BC, but where is the line on interfering? Aren't there some situations where someone actually may know better than the person making the decision?

Liz

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Excellent. Some valid and helpful points particularly with active listening, something my husband accuses me of not doing. Thank you!

Lin

formerly, Director UR (Ret 1997), NSHCHS

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Riding shotgun is sometimes a difficult requirement that life thrusts upon us. My wife has suffered from a devastating stroke, and I have learned to ride shotgun, because the agenda has been taken out of my hands by God. Sometimes I do not like it, but I always know that whatever God allows into my life is best for me. In selfishness, I could run from my problems, and demand that if I can't take the wheel, and control my circumstances, then I will not participate. The loss would be mine. The blessings of God come by putting others first!

Richard Tinker
Retired, Herman Miller Inc.

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