

The Changing Structures of Doula Work

Professions evolve over time, and doula work is no exception. When I first came to this work, most doulas worked by themselves with informal backup support. Now, more and more doula groups, collectives and partnerships are forming to support our changing needs. The structure of doula work is evolving with options available that can benefit our clients, our business and our families in different ways. Many doulas are asking, 'what is the right business structure for me?'

Types of Doula Business Structures

There are many variations, including ways to categorize them. Let's take a look at a few common examples.

1. Solo or Individual:
 - a. an individual doula works alone
 - b. an individual doula has formal or informal backup relationship(s)
2. Duos or Partners:
 - a. two doulas have their own individual practices and work closely with another doula
 - b. the work of the two doulas overlap, as they have some business separate and some together
 - c. the two doulas function primarily as a partnership with one business with all clients shared
3. Groups or Collectives:
 - a. three or more doulas form a group, they each individually serve clients but come together to support each other as doulas
 - b. three or more doulas create one business to serve clients
 - c. a doula (or more) create a group practice and contract doulas under their business

Advantages and Disadvantages

Each of us have varying personal styles and strengths, we each practice in unique geographic areas, and we all have differing business, personal and family needs. There are also accounting and legal advantages and disadvantages that impact each of us differently (*for these issues it's best to consult an accountant or lawyer*). Therefore the pros and cons are different for each of us and can change over time.

In addition, each structure's setup is radically different. For example, one group may have individual clients with individual doulas, while another group shares all clients but offer continuous care once labor starts, while yet another group may shift out a doula every 10-15 hours.

Below are some general advantages and disadvantages that can potentially come with different models.

POTENTIAL DIFFERENCES & BENEFITS FOR CLIENTS

SOLO or INDIVIDUAL	DUOS or PARTNER	GROUPS or COLLECTIVE
Individual care with one known, consistent doula	Fresh doula available, known backup (<i>maybe even available for a food run or forgotten items</i>)	Fresh doula available, known backup (<i>maybe even available for a food run or forgotten items</i>)

One person available to be contacted with questions and for support (phone / email)	Two people available to be contacted with questions and for support (phone/email)	Multiple people available to be contacted with questions and for support (phone/email)
Individual care with one, known, consistent doula	Potential for another doula to join in at a birth for photos, extra hands-on support, with twins, multiples or cesarean births	Potential for another doula to join in at a birth for photos, extra hands-on support, twins, multiples or cesarean births
Singular Perspective	More diverse ideas, tips and tricks available from broader perspectives	More diverse ideas, tips and tricks available from broader perspectives

POTENTIAL DIFFERENCES & BENEFITS FOR DOULAS

SOLO or INDIVIDUAL	DUOS or PARTNER	GROUPS or COLLECTIVE
More time on-call	Splitting Call Schedule in half	Sharing Call Schedule with team
Seems to work well for those who can devote their time to their spontaneous doula schedule	Seems to work well for those with competing time needs (<i>family/other jobs</i>)	Seems to work well with for those with competing time needs (<i>family/other jobs</i>)
Advanced vacation planning is required, last minute needs/illness/travel is complicated	Some potential for coverage for last minute needs/illness/travel	Potential for coverage for last minute needs/illness/travel
No compromise/communication, decisions are made in isolation, no time needed for meetings	Some communicating/meeting, can be easier to make decisions	More time in communication/meetings: Decisions by consensus, the leader or the group
No interpersonal conflict; Complete autonomy and control	Potential to work with interpersonal conflict; surrender	Potential to work with interpersonal conflict; surrender
Client tracking systems individualized	Client tracking system shared	Client tracking system shared
Performing all the roles of business	Splitting business roles in half	More resources, more role differentiation (work from strengths of each member)
Need a backup system in place	Back-up system is built-in, but may need occasional outside back up support	Back-up system is built-in, less likely to need outside back up support

Solo profits	Splitting profits	Profit sharing
Childcare needed	Potential for childcare exchange	Potential for childcare exchange
Requires setting up systems to support	Deep support and caring for each other (increase longevity, reduce burnout)	Deep support and caring for each other (increase longevity, reduce burnout)
Requires setting up systems to debrief with a professional in a confidential way	Debriefing after a birth (<i>be it sharing elation, processing a difficult experience, gathering feedback, strategizing for next time</i>)	Debriefing after a birth (<i>be it sharing elation, processing a difficult experience, gathering feedback, strategizing for next time</i>), but can be less time to process, if higher volume of clients
Requires setting up ongoing learning opportunities	Learning ongoing from each other, as well as support for learning	Learning ongoing from each other, as well as support for learning
Typically a smaller, more individualized practice deeply knowing each client	Typically a smaller, practice knowing clients more intimately	Typically a larger, broader practice connecting with lots of clients

Considering a Doula Group or Partnership

There are important questions to honestly ask yourself when forming a group or partnership. It's then important to have truly open, candid dialogues with the person/persons you are interested in working with. Invest the time upfront to be intentional, thoughtful and thorough, so your experience can be positive for you and your clients.

Conflicts arise from unspoken or unmet expectation, especially around the topics of time, money and values. Not all conflicts are avoidable, so also talk about how you handle conflicts and disagreements (this can be the most challenging conversation to have).

I developed a list of 40 questions I recommend exploring together, and the list is split into the categories "theoretical" and "practical." Here is a sampling of some of the questions I recommend as dialogue starters:

THEORETICAL

1. What do I love about doula work (*what is my passion, drive, calling, connections, why I do this work*)? Who are my Ideal Clients?
2. Why do I want to work in a partnership/group? What are the advantages I am hoping for? What are the disadvantages that I am concerned about? What more information do I need?
3. Who are the support people in my life? How do they (really) feel about my work? Who are the people I support in my life? What do I need to support them?

4. What are my strengths? What I am good at? What are my challenges and what I am not so great at? What is my communication style? leadership style? administrative preferences? conflict resolution techniques? How will this look in our work together?
5. What are potential breakdowns or triggers for me? What are some strategies I use to mitigate or work with these? How might they impact our working relationship? How will we handle conflict that arises?
6. How do I love to feel before, during, after, in between serving clients? What are my needs, desires, and what do I do to connect with these feelings?

PRACTICAL

1. Brainstorm all possible roles and tasks for your doula business. Then categorize them into what areas you each want to do and are good at doing. (*for example, maybe someone rocks at marketing, and another person loves the administrative tracking?*) Where are overlaps or gaps? Who will do what?
2. What services do we offer? What are our on-call times? Who and how is it decided? How will our services look/feel to our clients? How will we communicate with our clients?
3. How will we track client information securely? What information is shared? How is it shared? What software will be used to track calendars, appointments, emails, contacts, etc?
4. What will we charge? How do we handle sliding scale requests? What is the breakdown of expenses or budget? What is the accounting system? Who will process (including taxes)? What, how and when are doulas paid? How are shared births paid? Are any expenses compensated? How will we handle disagreements around money?
5. Who is responsible for liability insurance? How can we best protect ourselves and our business in terms of liability?
6. How often will we check-in or meet? When? Where? How Long? What will be discussed? How will that time be structured?

Many groups take months or even years to iron out the layers of details involved in collaborating. Successful groups have ongoing feedback loops that continually gather information about what is working and what can be improved, so the business can continually adapt and grow.

All of the work you put into exploring these concepts in a collective business benefits you and those you serve. It may seem like a lot of effort, and as long as the benefits remain strong for you, keep with it. Just like labor, there is no rush; you can take your time, and trust in a positive outcome.

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