



Cooking Up Compromise

Remodeling a kitchen can test a relationship in unforeseen ways. **By JULIA MARANAN**

My husband, Dan, and I undertook a kitchen remodel in August that we'd been planning since we moved into our house eight years ago. Now, we're pretty handy people. We bought our house as a fixer-upper, and together we tackled refinishing floors, painting nearly every surface, renovating a bathroom, and turning the attic into finished living space as well as myriad other complicated projects. Along the way, we learned that Dan's engineer mind-set makes him better suited for construction and that I excel at taping/mudding/sanding and finish work. Once we both came to terms with this, our projects went faster and with much less frustration.

With the kitchen, we wanted a gut remodel, and neither of us had enough time or expertise to tackle such a beast. So we hired a contractor who let us do the demolition and the painting to keep the project within our budget. Besides the usual advice that everything will take twice as long (true – it took double the time we planned) and cost twice as much (not true – though we did go a few thousand dollars over budget), I wish someone had warned us about how such a massive, disruptive project would bring our own personalities into such sharp focus – and about the tension that can create.

I'm an introvert, I have a strong need for people to like me, and I prefer to avoid conflict (or

anything that remotely hints of conflict). On the other hand, Dan is outgoing, assertive, and has a wealth of experience with conflict resolution. Under normal circumstances, we've figured out how to work together in ways that play to each of our strengths without forcing the other too far out of his or her respective comfort zone. But in the case of the kitchen remodel, we've both had to stretch more than we anticipated.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised that my personality traits would extend to Steve, our contractor . . . and to his subcontractors, the plumber, the electrician, all the inspectors drifting in and out, and the employees at various home improve-

ment stores. My foibles played out in several ways: I made Dan ask the pesky questions and give instructions, even though I'm often home during the day, and I had Dan point out a spot that needed to be redone, lest I seem too demanding.

The one time my exasperated husband tried to make me ask Steve a question, I was on my way out the door while Steve was calling another client. "Sorry," I said to Dan, "he's on the phone," and I sped away before our contractor could hang up. I could tell Dan's patience was wearing thin, but I did my best to make up for it by researching all the kitchen-related purchases, taking care of all the bills, and trying to keep us reasonably well fed – roles I was more comfortable with.

The turning point came during painting. We had tried leftover paint from a previous project, but once Dan saw it on the walls, he didn't like it. In a time crunch to finish painting before the cabinets went up and the floors went down, I raced to the store. I had brought a nearly empty can of another color we both liked from a different

project, but the store no longer carried that paint. The clerk offered to try matching it with a computer, but after two failed attempts (we could see as soon as the colors were mixed that they didn't match the one I'd brought), I was tempted just to take one of those close-but-not-perfect colors and get out of the employee's hair. All I could think about was that I had already wasted 2 gallons of paint and there was a growing line of customers behind me. But then I thought about all the ways Dan had accommodated me with the kitchen, and I wanted to make sure he was happy with – not just tolerating – the wall color. So I took a deep breath and proposed a similar color in a different brand. To her credit and my relief, the clerk seemed perfectly happy to try a third time.

I left with a paint color Dan and I love and the reminder that it's worth stepping out of my comfort zone for his benefit now and then, just as he does for me.

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