

Men and Women Cling to Power for Different Reasons

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While male leaders often view stepping down as a threat to their identity and accomplishments, female leaders appear to be motivated by other factors.

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Succession is a critical issue for family businesses, and the failure of the incumbent leader to let go can have serious negative consequences. Since Sonnenfeld and Spence's work in 1989, family business researchers and advisors have assumed a single model of succession: the story of the aging patriarch reluctant to cede control. Driving this reluctance is the heroic self-concept, consisting of both the heroic mission and heroic stature.

But as more women are taking the helm of family enterprises, we wanted to see if they showed a similar resistance to letting go of their leadership roles and transferring power to a successor, and whether their reasons were the same as men's.

Since the original studies only included males, our study sought to replicate the earlier studies using new data to see if the findings about letting go would also apply to female leaders. If not, then it would open avenues for inquiry into why female leaders might be reluctant to step down.

We suspected that gender would influence the

relationship between a leader's self-image and their reluctance to let go. In other words, the reasons why male leaders are reluctant to let go of leadership might be different from those of female leaders.

We built our study on the idea that men and women are often socialized differently and may have different experiences and find different meanings in the workplace. Two well-established psychological factors are at play in the heroic self-concept, and are found in the "Precarious Manhood Theory." The first is heroic mission, which suggests that men feel a constant need to prove their masculinity, and assesses a career based on missions that are either accomplished or unfinished. Second is "heroic stature" which feeds one's attachment to the job, encompassing the leader's image in the business and community, and a drive for continuous validation. These attributes, first of family business leaders, identified in Sonnenfeld and Spence's 1989 study, may make men more likely to hold on to their leadership roles.

As our research discovered, they are not a factor in women leaders' decisions to step down or to retain power.

What We Studied

The traditional understanding of why family business leaders resist succession centers on these key elements:

Reluctance to Let Go: This was measured by multiplying the CEO's age by their tenure in the business.

Heroic Self-Concept: This was measured using survey data to develop two scales:

- *Heroic Stature*: This is considered an "ascribed status." We measured a leader's perceived status and identity within the firm and community. Survey dimensions included respect in the community, independence, tight knit family, development of the next generation, and positive social capital of the family firm.
- *Heroic Mission*: This is considered an "achieved status." We measured a leader's drive for continuous achievement and contribution to the business. Guided by the Precarious Manhood theory, we used survey dimensions that measured entrepreneurial orientation – i.e., risk taking, competitive aggression, and autonomy.

We used data from the highly regarded STEP consortium, a survey of 1048 family business CEOs from four geographic regions: North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America. The sample of leaders consisted of 785 males and 263 females.

What We Found

For men, both their status in the community (heroic stature) and their sense of unfinished business (heroic mission) make them more likely to stay in power longer. However, these factors had no significant impact on female leaders' decisions about succession.

Specifically:

- Gender does indeed moderate Sonnenfeld and Spence's finding about the relationship between the heroic self-concept and reluctance to let go.
- For male CEOs, both heroic stature and heroic mission were positively related to reluctance to let go. This means that men who had a strong sense of their status and who felt a strong drive to achieve were more likely to hold onto their leadership roles.
- For female CEOs, neither heroic stature nor heroic mission was significantly related to reluctance to let go.

We concluded that the factors that have long been assumed to drive reluctance to let go among male leaders may not be as relevant for female leaders. This suggests that women at the helm of family businesses approach leadership transition through a fundamentally different lens. While according to traditional succession models, male leaders often view stepping down as a threat to their identity and accomplishments, female

leaders appear not to be similarly motivated.

We learned that for male leaders, status and recognition serve as powerful anchors to their leadership role; the desire to complete their "mission" keeps them in power longer; and their identity is more deeply intertwined with their business leadership role. We suggest that for females these simply don't significantly add up to a reluctance to let go, and we need more study to help us understand what motivates them. Though it was beyond the scope of our study, we suspect that business is just one part of a woman's multiple sources of identity, so other factors influence her decision to relinquish power.

To summarize, the accepted model of the reluctant patriarch no longer tells the whole story, or at least an accurate story, of family business succession. As women increasingly lead family enterprises, understanding gender differences in leadership transition becomes crucial for successful succession planning. This research suggests that rather than trying to fit female leaders into traditional succession models, families and advisors need to develop new approaches that recognize and accommodate gender differences in leadership transition.

Takeaways

This research suggests that families, advisors, and potential successors may need to take different approaches when dealing with succession depending on the gender of the incumbent leader. The concept of the "Parting Patriarch" may need to be reconsidered as it doesn't accurately reflect the experiences of many female leaders.

While we offer some practical takeaways below, we want to emphasize that more research is needed to understand the motivations of female leaders and how to facilitate successful succession in businesses led by women.

Rethinking Succession Planning

Family businesses need to develop more nuanced approaches to succession that account for gender differences. For male leaders, this means addressing identity concerns directly; creating post-succession roles that maintain status; and developing clear pathways that allow them to continue to contribute to the firm. For female leaders, this means exploring individual motivations rather than assuming traditional patterns; considering broader life and family factors; and

focusing on relationship transitions rather than status concerns.

For Advisors and Consultants

The findings challenge traditional approaches to succession planning. Advisors should develop gender-specific tools and frameworks; avoid one-size-fits-all succession models; listen more carefully to individual motivations; and consider the broader context of leadership transition.

For Potential Successors (and Next Gens)

As more women assume leadership roles in family businesses, understanding these gender differences becomes increasingly critical. The next generation of family business leaders may need to navigate more diverse leadership styles; different approaches to power and status; new models of succession and transition; and evolving family and business dynamics.

Explore the Research

Forster-Holt, N., Davis, J., & Creech, C. (2024). [A gendered examination of heroic self-concept and letting go by family firm leaders.](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1877858524000172?via%3Dihub) (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1877858524000172?via%3Dihub>) *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, September 2024.

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