

Will Your Successors See Themselves as Heirs or Entrepreneurs?

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Mentoring plays a huge role in shaping how the next generation views the role of family business leader, a study in China shows.

"What's important is not your experiences, but your feelings about those experiences...My dad was very fierce, he hit me and scolded me, but in fact [I feel that] he was spurring me on." – Successor

In family businesses, succession is more than just a handover of assets or leadership titles. It's a deeply personal journey that involves shaping how the next generation sees themselves—not just as heirs, but as entrepreneurs in their own right.

After in-depth interviews with nine successful Chinese family business successors, we saw how successors in Chinese family firms interpret their entrepreneurial parents' mentoring and how this influences their own entrepreneurial identity. We explored how these successors reflected on their upbringing and the role their parents played in shaping their business identity, through listening for how they made sense of their parents' behavior—what they felt was supportive, meaningful, or transformative. Many of these successors described starting with uncertainty, questioning whether they truly fit the role of an entrepreneur. Over time, they grew into confident, self-aware leaders. This shift wasn't just about learning skills: It was about forming an entrepreneurial identity of a family entrepreneur.

How Parental Mentoring Strategies

Shape Entrepreneurial Identity

From the successors' reflections, we identified four perceived mentoring strategies that shaped their identity from ambiguity to clarity:

- 1. Laying the Foundations:** Successors experience the business world early—through observation, informal participation, and immersion in business-related conversations. This exposure built familiarity with and confidence in the family businesses.
- 2. Painting Bright Futures:** Successors feeling consistent emotional support, encouragement, and trust from their parents help them to see themselves as capable and empowered, especially during setbacks.
- 3. Relating Experiences:** Rather than being lectured on knowledge, successors learn about the complex business world and build resilience through listening to personal stories and real experiences of their entrepreneurial parents.
- 4. Leading by Example:** Parents modeled the entrepreneurial values they hoped to pass on—work ethic, vision, responsibility. This kind of everyday behavior deeply influenced how successors saw entrepreneurship in action.

The Cultural Influence: China

Chinese family business dynamics are shaped by strong Confucian values, including harmony and filial piety ("孝", a deep sense of family duty and respect for parents OR a core value in traditional Chinese culture, refers to the respect, obedience, and care that children owe to their parents). Parents, especially fathers, are seen as both caretakers and moral

authorities. That means mentoring often comes with both love and high expectations.

Successors in our study described feeling both nurtured and pressured: supported by their parents' involvement, but also carrying the weight of high expectations. This duality can be a source of both strength and stress. Yet, many told us this push-and-pull actually helped them grow into their entrepreneurial selves. As one next gen told us:

"I used to think I was just living my father's dream. Now, I realize I've made it my own."

Understanding Successors' Perceptions

One of the most fascinating aspects of our research is how differently successors interpreted their parents' behaviors and strategies, depending on timing, personal confidence, and family dynamics. What one child experienced as support, another might have perceived as pressure. This underscores a critical point for family business leaders: intention is not the same as impact. Mentoring is not only about what is done, but also how it is perceived and remembered.

For example, some successors described feeling "pushed into the business," only to later reinterpret their parents' strictness as an expression of care and long-term planning. Others recalled moments when their parents' vulnerability, such as admitting a mistake or asking for input, helped them see themselves as legitimate contributors, not just observers. These interpretations often marked turning points in how successors saw their role within the business.

The Emotional Dimension of Succession

Succession is not just a strategic decision; it's an emotional journey. Successors in our study often experienced a mix of gratitude, anxiety, pride, and self-doubt. The parental role, therefore, extends beyond business instruction—it includes emotional mentoring. Parents who acknowledged this emotional dimension tended to foster deeper trust and self-confidence in their successors.

It's important to recognize that identity formation is a relational process. Successors' sense of being "entrepreneurial" emerged not from isolated

achievements, but from gradually internalizing their parents' values, expectations, and feedback. In many cases, the mentoring relationship evolved over the years, transitioning from top-down instruction to mutual respect and even collaboration.

Takeaways

Family firms often pride themselves on long-term thinking. But long-term success requires more than passing down assets—it requires passing down identity, values, and the belief in one's ability to lead. Our research shows that with intentional mentoring, successors can move from uncertainty to ownership—from asking "Do I belong here?" to declaring "This is mine to lead."

As family businesses face generational transitions, the question is not only "who will take over," but also "who are they becoming in the process?" Entrepreneurial identity is the bridge between legacy and innovation—between what the business has been, and what it has the potential to become.

Our findings suggest several practical takeaways.

For family business leaders:

- Mentorship should begin early and unfold gradually. Exposure and observation in childhood lay the groundwork for later leadership.
- The most powerful messages are not always verbal. Successors are constantly interpreting what they see, whether it's how you treat employees, handle failure, or make sacrifices. Your everyday actions carry as much (if not more) weight than formal lessons or succession plans.
- Successors need room to develop their own voice. While honoring family legacy is important, identity clarity comes when successors feel they can shape the future, not just protect the past. Providing autonomy, encouraging experimentation, and tolerating missteps can go a long way in building this entrepreneurial mindset.

For the coming generations (successors):

- Recognize the power of mentoring styles. Successors need to be aware and reflect

constantly on how their parents' way of guiding — whether directive (teaching, instructing) or supportive (encouraging, sharing experiences) — influences how they see themselves as an entrepreneur. Being aware of this dynamic helps successors consciously develop their own entrepreneurial identity rather than simply inheriting theirs. A true entrepreneurial identity is not a copy-and-paste job; it is about starting a new line—to press Enter and begin a new chapter of your own.

- Actively shape own entrepreneurial identity. A role model is not simply for copying; it goes deeper in developing moral and behavioral principles. While parents' guidance forms a foundation, successors need to reflect on their own strengths, aspirations, and values. This forms the baseline of legitimacy for a successor in both the family and the business, so as to carve out credibility as an independent leader. To achieve this, find your own passions and engage in small personal projects. These experiences will help you build a sense of achievement that is entirely your own, rather than living in the shadow of your parents.

Conclusion

Parents' mentoring styles universally matter. While we use cases from China, we believe that across cultures, successors are influenced by how parents guide them, whether directive or supportive. The way mentoring is perceived can either empower successors' entrepreneurial identity or constrain it.

Building an entrepreneurial identity is critical in succession. Regardless of cultural background, successors must actively construct and negotiate their entrepreneurial identity to be seen as legitimate leaders by both family and non-family stakeholders.

Explore the Research

Li GM, Ge B, Dou J. [Like Father Like Son: How Perceived Parental Mentoring Strategies Shape Successors' Entrepreneurial Identity in Chinese Family Businesses](#)

(<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/management-and-organization-review/article/abs/like-father-like-son-how-perceived-parental-mentoring-strategies-shape-successors-entrepreneurial-identity-in-chinese-family-businesses/C846B1F57AA78FE1BF9E6888D45799E1>) .