

Ready to Lead: Building Confidence Across Generations

Paul Edelman (Babson College)

KEYWORDS: family business succession planning, Decision-making, Interactive and Experiential Learning.

When families treat readiness as something they cultivate together, succession feels less like a loss and more like a natural next step. Leadership becomes a capacity shared across generations rather than any one person's achievement.

Most approaches to succession focus on evaluating the rising generation, but in my work with families, I've found that readiness develops in parallel across generations. Rising leaders grow through meaningful participation and shared reflection, while senior leaders build confidence in letting go as they observe judgment forming in real time.

This article introduces a framework for "parallel readiness," where capability, confidence, and trust take shape through relationship rather than assessment. When families cultivate these conditions together, leadership transitions feel less like a handoff and more like a natural evolution.

In many families, readiness for increasing responsibility does not take shape automatically. It often requires intention, real participation, and a willingness to grow together. When the conditions are right, readiness can develop in parallel across generations: rising leaders grow more confident stepping forward, and senior leaders grow more confident stepping back. These two movements reinforce each other and support a natural transition.

This kind of symmetry tends to take shape when both generations are involved in each other's learning. It appears when rising leaders have real opportunities to take on responsibility and senior leaders stay close enough to notice capability forming. When both generations engage in shared work, deliberate reflection, and steady conversation about what

readiness looks like, confidence builds in a way that feels genuine and earned.

Readiness Takes Shape Through Real Participation

Families often assume that rising leaders will become ready by watching. And observation does help, especially in the early years. But readiness develops when rising leaders have real responsibility and families stay in steady conversation about how the work is unfolding. They talk about what feels solid, what is proving harder, and what may require a different approach.

Even small responsibilities can matter. Rising leaders get to step forward with support nearby, and senior leaders can step back while staying engaged. These early experiences move readiness forward for both generations.

These responsibilities can take many forms. A rising leader might lead a small project, chair a committee, explore a new idea, or manage a relationship with a trusted advisor. What matters is the experience of making decisions in real conditions. As rising leaders experiment with decisions and senior leaders watch capability emerge, the work itself becomes the teacher. That is often when readiness begins to show.

Reflection Turns Experience Into Judgment

Experience offers the raw material for leadership. Judgment develops when families take time to look at that experience together. Even a brief conversation after a decision can help everyone see how the thinking took shape and what the situation taught them.

A senior-generation founder once described a moment like this with his son. They had spent the morning reviewing whether to continue a promising but still uncertain venture the family had been exploring. After

the meeting, during a quiet walk back to the office, the founder asked, “What stood out to you in how we approached that decision?” The son talked about what he had been weighing, where he hesitated, and what he might try differently the next time they faced something similar. The founder later said, “That short walk told me more about his readiness than the decision itself.”

Reflection plays a role for each generation. Rising leaders start to see their own decision-making more clearly, and senior leaders get to observe how judgment is forming and where support might help. When families treat reflection as part of the work rather than something reserved for problems, readiness tends to grow in steady, recognizable ways.

Over time, this shared habit builds confidence. Rising leaders feel seen for their effort and thinking, and senior leaders gain trust in how the next generation approaches decisions. Reflection becomes a place where readiness is easier to notice and easier to encourage.

The Strength in Sharing the Early Chapters

Leadership often looks more polished from the outside than it feels on the inside. Early thinking is rarely tidy. When rising leaders share their early ideas, before everything is fully formed, they give senior leaders a clearer view of how their judgment is developing. Those glimpses build trust.

There is another pattern that shows up in many families. Senior leaders are often remembered at the peak of their achievements. The long arc of their learning fades, and what remains is a neat story about how things went well. Rising leaders grow up with those stories. Without meaning to, families create the sense that earlier generations moved through uncertainty with more ease than they actually did. That can make younger family members cautious, reluctant to try things that might not work right away.

One helpful corrective is for senior leaders to share more of their own early chapters, the parts of the story that do not usually get told. The projects that wobbled at first. The decisions they second-guessed. The moments when they were not sure what to do next. Younger family members rarely hear those stories, and when they do, it changes the atmosphere. Learning feels safer. Taking a chance feels normal. And the gap

between generations feels smaller.

When both generations are willing to share the early stages of their thinking, learning becomes something they do together rather than something they evaluate in each other. It lowers the pressure on rising leaders, reminds senior leaders of how development actually unfolds, and makes readiness easier to recognize.

Readiness Is a Shared Responsibility

Families sometimes treat readiness as a judgment passed from one generation to the next. In practice, it develops through a relationship. Rising leaders need real chances to make decisions, learn from experience, and see their own judgment take shape. Senior leaders need ways to stay close enough to notice that growth and occasionally recalibrate how much involvement is needed.

There is also a quieter side to this transition. Senior leaders have usually spent decades shaping the enterprise. Letting go can stir up complicated feelings, including a fear of losing control, a shift in identity, or a worry that the next generation might make decisions that put what they built at risk. These reactions are common, and they often sit just beneath the surface.

Neither generation can do this alone. Rising leaders cannot grow in confidence without meaningful responsibility, and senior leaders cannot build trust without seeing capability form in real situations. When families approach readiness as something created together, the process becomes more constructive.

This shared approach also makes room for the emotional side of the transition. Rising leaders often feel the weight of expectations, and senior leaders often feel the complexity of stepping back while still caring deeply about the outcome. When families see readiness as a joint effort, those emotions become easier to talk about and easier to navigate.

Recognizing Readiness When It Emerges

One question I often encourage families to ask is, “What would be a sign of increasing readiness?” It shifts the conversation from a vague judgment to a shared understanding of what both generations are working toward.

Readiness rarely appears all at once. More often, it surfaces in small ways, in a rising leader's growing steadiness, in a senior leader's willingness to step back, and in the conversations that help both generations understand what they are seeing. Families that pay attention to these early signals find the transition far less abrupt.

Over time, these shared experiences begin to reshape the relationship. Rising leaders see that they can take on more. Senior leaders see that they can let go without abandoning what matters most. Confidence grows, not through a single moment of decision, but through many moments of shared work.

Readiness develops gradually, through experience, reflection, and shared responsibility. Families usually know when they have reached that point.

When families treat readiness as something they cultivate together, the handoff feels less like a loss and more like a natural next step. Leadership becomes a capacity shared across generations rather than the achievement of any one individual.