

Rom-Coms Can Complicate Your Succession Planning

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KEYWORDS: Next Generation, family business advice, family business succession planning, family business conflict.

Unrealistic depictions of the sacrifices and tradeoffs of family business leadership -- streamed repeatedly -- can color younger people's attitudes towards taking the helm.

Popular TV dramas like "Succession," "Yellowstone," and "The House of Guinness" vividly depict the rancor that can happen when family members vie for leadership of the business. Most viewers know that the back-stabbing and emotional turmoil, while perhaps containing a grain of truth, are exaggerated for dramatic effect.

However, most people don't realize that a more benign form of entertainment – the romantic comedy – can also exert a dangerous influence on younger generations' attitudes about the family business and the sacrifices and tradeoffs involved in leading one. Unless families recognize it and correct it, these ingrained "scripts" can complicate important discussions about succession.

As parents, you may have taught your children that real relationships aren't like the ones in the movies. You wouldn't let a romantic comedy teach your children about marriage or let a legal thriller inform their estate planning. Still, you may have inadvertently allowed romantic comedy plot points to shape your next generation's understanding of family business, overriding factors like family origin stories, birth order, and generational patterns.

How Entertainment Shapes Attitudes

Social psychologist Albert Bandura's research reveals how entertainment can become education. According to his Four Stages of Observational Learning, we: pay attention to attractive protagonists, retain their decision-

making patterns, reproduce their choices in our own situations, and feel motivated by their happy endings. Rom-com heroes can become unconscious role models for navigating complex family business decisions.

Unlike superhero movies, romantic comedies are designed to feel achievable, with contemporary settings, relatable emotions, and ordinary people facing family decisions. So, when these movies depict family businesses, younger family members might mistake these depictions for reality.

The Impact of Streaming

Netflix's director of original film reports that two-thirds of its 80 million members watched love stories in a single year. Hallmark went from six original holiday movies in 2010 to more than 33 annually.

Years ago, people might have gone to the movie theater only once to see these films. But today streaming allows for people to watch again and again, often during formative years. According to Netflix, one in three viewers of rom-coms rewatched them, 30% higher than the average movie rewatch rate. For younger family members, these movies may have been more than just entertainment; they could have given them a false impression of how family firms operate and what it might be like to lead one.

These patterns show up in specific ways across popular films:

The Scripts in Action My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002): The "No Other Options" Script

There's a moment where Toula's aunt says to her parents, "You'll always have Toula to run the restaurant. She'll never leave you." Consider that language for a moment: "You'll always have Toula." Certain family members can become tagged early on as "the reliable

one," the one who stays, based on family position rather than whether they are most qualified or whether they even want the role.

Christmas in Graceland (2012): Three Scripts Simultaneously

This Hallmark movie demonstrates three potentially limiting beliefs in 90 minutes.

- **Script 1: Geographic Loyalty = Family Loyalty**
When Laurel asks Clay, "You'd really leave Memphis?" it reveals a possible assumption: loyalty to place equals loyalty to family business. Geographic choice becomes a moral test rather than a strategic business decision. However, many family businesses recognize that you can honor family legacy from anywhere. Geographic location and family loyalty are, in fact, separate variables.
- **Script 2: Dreams vs. Responsibilities**
When Laurel's daughter asks why she doesn't sing anymore, Laurel responds, "When people are young, they have dreams. When they get older, they have responsibilities." This can create false choices in thinking through someone's future, personally and professionally. The implied binary is that you must choose between personal fulfillment and family obligations.
- **Script 3: Corporate Growth = Lost Family Values**
The family president of the bank she's trying to acquire tells Laurel, "We're all about family, looking after each other. We leave every day at five o'clock to be with our families." Meanwhile, her corporate boss represents cold efficiency. The suggested binary is that business growth equals the loss of family values.

In other examples, "You've Got Mail" (1998) reinforces the "big business versus family business" tension, with Kathleen's inherited bookstore representing authentic values while corporate chains symbolize cold efficiency. "Sweet Home Alabama" (2002) presents geographic choice as a moral test of loyalty, suggesting career success in the "big city" is incompatible with honoring family roots. "Hanukkah on Rye" (2022) demonstrates how family business loyalty can conflict with personal relationships when rival enterprises threaten each other. "Falling for Christmas" (2022) presents family business

participation as an obligation rather than a choice, with the heiress ultimately rejecting her family empire entirely for "authentic" life.

The influences of films like these, reinforced by repeated watching, can show up in conversations that family business members have with one another over matters like succession. It's not that the scripts simply reinforce each other—they layer and compound upon one another. If you hear "I can't leave this place" in the same conversation as "I had to give up my dreams," you may be dealing with beliefs that may come from repeated movie exposure rather than family experience.

Strategies for Families

Pay attention to what family members say during important discussions about succession or the family's strategic direction. Listen for themes and phrases that might have come from a rom-com rather than the family system. Here are some examples.

Cultural Expectations: "We can count on..." / "the responsible one" / "always stays" / "Expected to..." / "Family needs me to..." / "You're natural at this." / "It's in your blood."

Geographic Loyalty: "You'd really leave this place?" / "Everything I want is here." / "This is home." / "Everything important is here." / "If you want to make something of yourself..." / "The opportunities are elsewhere." / "Making it in the big city."

Dreams vs. Responsibilities: "Had to choose" / "When you get older..." / "Gave up ..." / "Can't have both" / "Be realistic." / "You have responsibilities now."

Corporate vs. Family: "Preserve our culture" / "Not like big corporations" / "Growth means losing soul." / "We don't work with competitors." / "It's just business to them."

Magical Resolution: "Once we figure this out" / "Perfect solution" / "Best of both worlds" / "It'll all work out." / "Everything happens for a reason." / "It'll be perfect" / "We'll figure it out" / "It'll be fine."

Unpack the Story

When you notice these patterns, you might ask: "What story are we telling ourselves about this decision?" followed by "Where did we learn that story?" Follow up with: "Are there other possibilities we haven't

considered?"

When the same phrases appear repeatedly in family conversations, you might say, "I'm noticing a theme," and then test assumptions by asking, "What would it look like if both things could be true?" This approach can help your family separate emotional attachment from strategic thinking while honoring both.

Reframe the Discussion

Instead of: "You ended up in the family business"

Try: "You chose to bring your talents to the family business"

Follow with: "What unique value do you bring? How does this choice align with your strengths?"

Talk About What They're Watching

Don't wait for succession pressure to address these narratives. When your teenagers binge-watch rom-coms, engage them in conversations about the stories being told. Ask: "How realistic do you think this family business situation is?" and "What would actually happen after the 'happy ending'?"

Create Alternate Stories

Share authentic family business stories that demonstrate nuanced decision-making. Talk about family members who've contributed from different geographies, balanced personal interests with business needs, or found creative solutions that honored both growth and values. Help your next generation see examples beyond the rom-com template.

Embrace Complexity

Unlike rom-com scripts that tie everything up in a neat bow by the ending, family business decisions require ongoing conversation, compromise, and adjustment. Embrace the complexity and don't try to seek the "perfect solution." For example, frame succession planning as a process of continuous alignment rather than a one-time decision that will resolve everything.

The Bottom Line

Your family's succession conversations may be more complex than they appear on the surface. The next time succession planning feels stuck, it might be worth asking: Is this purely business complexity, or could some romantic comedy narratives be influencing your thinking? Because once you recognize these possible

scripts, you can help your family write something better—something that honors both the heart and the reality of family business.