

How Families Can Re-Engage Reluctant Successors Without Pressure

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Successors recommit when roles align with their values, skills, and life stage—and when family dynamics allow earlier experiences to be reinterpreted.

Many family firms think about succession when the next generation reaches adulthood. That is when career choices become real, leadership roles are discussed, and formal succession plans begin to take form. By that point, families often assume potential successors have already made up their minds about the business. Our research suggests that this assumption may be misleading.

For many successors, childhood experiences -- such as overhearing business discussions at the dinner table, being asked to help after school, witnessing conflict between family members, or feeling pride in their family business -- can leave lasting impressions. Over time, these early experiences shape whether the business feels like a place of belonging or a source of distance, influencing whether the successors grow up feeling connected to the firm, conflicted about it, or motivated to step away.

What We Studied

To better understand how early experiences influence succession outcomes, we conducted an in-depth qualitative study of 25 multigenerational family firms across a range of industries, speaking to a total of 64 family firm members. During interviews with potential successors, we found that a substantial number had considered leaving the family firm or had actively

withdrawn from it at some point. These families were identified through professional networks, referrals, and outreach to multigenerational family firms, allowing us to speak with successors who had experienced periods of disengagement as well as those who later re-engaged.

Rather than focusing only on whether successors eventually joined the business, we asked why some stayed engaged and why others stepped away. Our two research questions were: how and why do some successors with negative childhood exposure to the family firm still achieve successful transgenerational succession? And what role do significant family or business incidents play in restoring commitment and prompting successors to re-engage? This approach allowed us to examine both positive and negative early experiences and how those experiences related to later decisions to stay, step away, or return.

What We Found: Childhood Exposure is Not Neutral

Families often view childhood involvement in the business as inherently positive. Prior research suggests that early exposure is commonly framed as character building, responsibility enhancing, and a way to prepare the next generation for future leadership roles (Istiplicher et al., 2024).

Our findings complicate this assumption. Childhood exposure does more than create familiarity with the business. It shapes early emotional attachment to the family firm and influences whether successors can envision a future for themselves within it. Across our cases, successors described very different early experiences with the family firm. Some recalled feeling trusted, included, and proud of the business. Others

remembered feeling pressured to participate, overlooked, or caught in the middle of unresolved conflict. These early experiences were closely tied to whether successors developed an emotional attachment to the firm or began to distance themselves from it internally.

Why Affective Commitment Matters

One of the clearest insights from our research is that not all forms of commitment are equal. Some successors remain involved because they feel they should. Others stay for practical reasons, such as financial security or limited alternatives. These forms of commitment can keep someone in the firm, but they do not necessarily reflect a deep emotional connection to the business or a long-term desire to remain engaged.

In contrast, successors who described the most sustained engagement over time- including those who had withdrawn earlier and later returned- expressed a strong emotional attachment to the family firm.. We refer to this attachment as affective commitment, defined as “an individual’s emotional connection, identification, and involvement with the family business and an alignment of interests between the successor and the company” (Cater et al., 2025, p. 5). In our study, affective commitment was evident when successors spoke about the business as something they cared about personally, not simply something they felt obligated to support.

Importantly, affective commitment often starts forming early. Childhood experiences with the family firm can lay the groundwork for this emotional attachment, even when that connection is later disrupted by negative experiences. In our study, some successors who lacked a strong emotional connection to the family firm often described periods of mental disengagement, even when they continued to participate in the business. This necessitated rebuilding their affective commitment and emotional attachment to the family business.

Re-Engagement Often Requires Rebuilding Commitment, Not Just Pressure

Negative childhood experiences do not always permanently derail succession. In our study, some successors who had withdrawn later re-engaged with the family firm following what we call revelatory incidents. These were meaningful moments in young adulthood that prompted successors to reinterpret their

earlier experiences and reconsider their relationship with the business.

These incidents took different forms across families. In some cases, successors were asked to step into responsibility during a family or business crisis, such as filling in unexpectedly or helping stabilize the firm during a difficult period. Being trusted in these moments allowed the successor to see the business, and their role in it, in a new light. In other cases, time away from the firm created distance from earlier negative experiences and provided perspective. After pursuing education, work, or opportunities elsewhere, some successors returned with a clearer understanding of what the business represented and what they could contribute to it.

Additionally, a few successors came to appreciate the broader purpose of the family firm in its role of supporting family members or creating a long-term legacy. They felt more aligned with the values of the firm and how it harmonized with their lives now in ways it may not have before. These revelatory experiences indicated that re-engagement was not explained by pressure or obligation alone. Rather than erasing negative childhood experiences, revelatory incidents helped successors make sense of those experiences differently. In doing so, they rebuilt an emotional connection to the firm – making renewed engagement both possible and more durable.

Takeaways

For families hoping to retain or re-engage next-generation leaders, several implications emerge from our findings.

Early experiences matter. Children begin forming early attachments to the family firm long before succession is ever discussed, and these early impressions can shape how they later interpret opportunities to engage with the business. Across our cases, everyday interactions – how conflict is handled, how children are included, and whether their contributions are acknowledged – had lasting effects on future commitment.

Families should not assume that exposure to the business is always positive. In our study, forced involvement, unresolved family conflict, and perceptions of unfairness often contributed to emotional distance rather than attachment. Importantly, stepping away from

the family firm did not necessarily signal rejection. For many successors, withdrawal reflected an effort to gain clarity, autonomy, or perspective in response to earlier experiences. Family firms can counteract this when dysfunctional behaviors in families do not evolve into a toxic family system.

Nurture emotional commitment. Our findings also suggest that re-engagement was most durable when families helped successors rebuild emotional commitment by changing how successors understood the business and their place within it, rather than by offering positions or appealing to obligation. In some cases, successors reconnected after learning new information that helped them reinterpret earlier family dynamics -- such as realizing that decisions they had viewed as unfair were rooted in broader family responsibilities. In other cases, affective commitment developed when successors were persuaded to re-engage in ways that aligned with their lives and values, such as flexible schedules, meaningful work, or roles allowing them to apply skills developed elsewhere. Across these experiences, successors were more likely to recommit when they came to see the family firm as something they wanted to be part of, rather than something they felt they should do.

Taken together, these findings suggest that succession does not begin when a successor formally joins the firm. It unfolds over time, shaped by childhood experiences and by how families respond when commitment is strained. Whether the family firm ultimately becomes a place of belonging or a source of distance depends less on pressure and more on whether emotional commitment is allowed to be clarified, repaired, and rebuilt.

Explore the Research

Cater, J.C., R. Kidwell, M. Harper, and M. Young. 2025. Retaining reluctant successors in family firms: The roles of childhood exposure and affective commitment, *Journal of Small Business Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2025.2546007>.

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