

Helping Daughters Become Successful Family Business Leaders

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Daughters can become strong and credible successors when families involve them early, clarify authority, support professional development, and make room for new models of leadership.

While daughters are increasingly emerging as credible and relevant family business successors, the expectations are higher for daughters than for sons, who are often implicitly perceived as natural successors. Daughters must more frequently explain, legitimize, and actively shape their leadership roles. For them, succession is more than an organizational or legal transfer of control: It touches on fundamental questions of identity, belonging, and legitimacy, as well as persistent role expectations and assumptions within the family, the business, and society.

As a result, succession involving daughters is often shaped by challenges that arise well before any formal handover. This happens even for daughters who do not currently intend to take over the business, or when they need to take over in unforeseen situations, such as sudden leadership vacancies, crises, or unplanned transitions. This makes succession less a discrete event and more an identity- and relationship-based developmental process.

In this article we aim to explore the central challenges and success factors of daughter succession and to deepen understanding of the specific dynamics characterizing female succession processes in family businesses. It first looks at key challenges arising from the interplay of family, business, and personal roles in daughter succession, then outlines success factors that help daughters consciously shape and stabilize

succession processes over time.^[1]

Challenges Faced by Daughters in Succession

As daughters are often among the first female successors, their entry into the family business represents a break with established patterns. Figure 1 synthesizes key business-related themes relevant to all successors, such as governance, leadership, and legal issues, and contrasts them with three tension fields – self-concept, partnership, and the role of mother and entrepreneur – that are particularly formative for daughters in succession. For daughters, engaging with these themes is often accompanied by additional questions of loyalty and legitimacy.

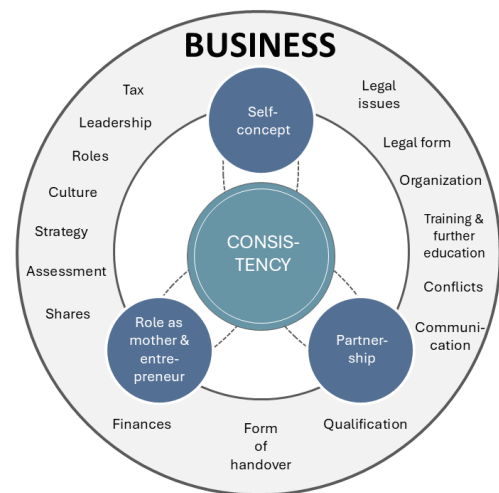


Figure 1: Finding compatibility and consistency (Caspary & Rösen 2025)

Influences on Daughters' Self-Concept

Whether daughters consider succession is closely linked to their early socialization. Implicit assumptions

about who is seen as responsible for the business and who is perceived as capable of leadership often emerge early in childhood and adolescence. These patterns typically remain unspoken, yet they exert a lasting influence on self-perception and perceived scope for action.

This means that daughters often don't see themselves as natural entrepreneurs, unless they can overcome the family's existing expectations and established gender stereotypes. Parental trust and early recognition as a potential successor – particularly by the father – can encourage daughters. When they are involved early and taken seriously in business-related matters, they have stronger self-confidence and decision-making security. Without this affirmation, they can feel internal ambivalence, doubts about suitability, and reluctance to assume leadership.

Typical factors that may negatively affect daughters' self-concept include:

- Loyalty conflicts between personal life plans and family expectations
- Appreciation mainly for adaptability and loyalty rather than autonomy
- Lower levels of early involvement in business-related topics compared to brothers
- Lack of female role models and implicit messages reinforcing leadership as a predominantly male domain
- Missing early attribution of leadership capability and successor potential within the family

These factors suggest that daughters who seek a leadership role should reflect on these early influences and internalized role and gender expectations, and transcend them to develop confidence and agency.

The Impact of Spouses and Partners

Beyond the family of origin, the relationship with a spouse or partner plays a central yet often underestimated role in the succession process and in sustaining long-term continuity. For daughters, it can be both an emotional resource and a potential source of strain. The close interdependence of family and business directly affects the partnership.

During the transition phase, when successors are often heavily absorbed by the business, partners may see this as a challenge to established role perceptions and self-

concepts. The daughter may act differently as an ascendant leader than she does in her partner role. The following aspects are particularly challenging:

- Conflicts of loyalty or perceived competition between the partner and the family of origin
- Partners' uncertainty in dealing with differences in status or income
- Expectations that the business will permanently take priority in terms of time and emotional commitment
- Unclear assumptions regarding role distribution, family planning, and career priorities
- Strain arising from legal issues such as marital agreements or asset arrangements

A sustainable partnership does not emerge automatically; it requires deliberate and ongoing negotiation. For daughters, this means addressing the entrepreneurial, time-related, and emotional implications of succession at an early stage, making expectations explicit, and defining clear boundaries between the couple relationship and the business. Without this, unresolved relationship tensions can destabilize the succession process.

Caught Between Business and Motherhood

A central challenge in daughter succession concerns the compatibility of business leadership and motherhood. Despite broader societal change, daughters often feel they must choose between leadership and mothering. This either/or logic makes it challenging for women to justify and explain their decisions, and tends to intensify self-doubt.

The structure of family businesses make this even more difficult. Family businesses have historically been shaped by expectations of continuous availability, physical presence, and highly person-centered responsibility – models only partially compatible with shared roles, caregiving responsibilities, and more collaborative forms of leadership. As a result, daughters are confronted with the question of how leadership can be exercised without permanently marginalizing their role as mothers.

Typical areas of tension include:

- Societal evaluations and implicit norms regarding mothers in leadership positions

- Expectations from the senior generation to consistently prioritize the business
- Insufficient structural support within existing organizational and leadership models
- A lack of role models for alternative leadership and work arrangements
- High personal performance expectations in both roles

The good news is that daughters stepping into top roles can reshape structures, share responsibility, and establish new models of leadership – such as team-based leadership, tandem arrangements, or more flexible organizational forms. But first, they must question traditional leadership assumptions and clearly articulate their own needs within both the family and the organization.

Success Factors for Daughters

Taken together, these challenges underscore that female succession extends far beyond a formal handover. It unfolds simultaneously across multiple levels – the successor herself, the family, and the business – affecting identity, relationships, and life design. Without a deliberate engagement with these interconnected levels, latent tensions may arise that can delay or even derail succession processes. This complexity can be very challenging for daughters, who not only assume new roles but are also required to question and reshape established expectations, routines, and role assignments.

Successful daughter succession depends less on one-size-fits-all solutions and more on clear guiding principles that fit each family’s specific situation. The eight success factors in Figure 2 highlight the main areas where action can make the greatest difference. These factors matter in succession more broadly, but they are especially important in daughter succession because gender-based expectations often affect how daughters are seen, accepted, and given authority as leaders. They are also relevant to daughters who take on other leadership roles in family businesses.



Figure 2: Success factors for female succession (Casparly & Rüsen 2025)

These factors should not be viewed in isolation but as mutually reinforcing elements. It is their interaction that enables succession to move beyond a formal transfer toward a deliberately shaped and sustainable process.

Personal Attitude and Self-Image

A viable succession begins when the daughter is clear about her motivation, role, and responsibility. Their decision to succeed is often more intensely scrutinized – by the family and by themselves. Unclear motivation, or feeling resigned to the role because of duty, weakens decision-making capacity and leadership effectiveness over time.

In practice, daughters frequently oscillate between loyalty to the family and the desire for self-determination. Succession is then experienced less as a personal choice and more as a response to perceived expectations. Daughters who sustain their role over time develop early clarity about why they want to assume leadership and what they are unwilling or unable to take on.

Key areas of focus include:

- Deliberate reflection on personal motives for or against succession
- A realistic assessment of strengths, limits, and development needs
- Acceptance that leadership involves learning, mistakes, and uncertainty

- Development of an individual leadership and life concept beyond inherited role expectations
- Active investment in personal reflection, for example through coaching or sparring

This clearer self-understanding does not replace competence, but it provides the necessary foundation for assuming responsibility, negotiating roles, and exercising leadership consistently in the face of conflicting expectations.

Cooperation with the Senior Generation

Collaboration with the senior generation (SenGen) represents one of the most sensitive success factors in the succession process. Proximity, trust, and shared history coexist with issues of power, dependency, and unspoken loyalties. This can be challenging for women to want to be both daughters and independent entrepreneurial actors.

In practice, roles between the SenGen and successors frequently remain unclear. Even after the SenGen formally withdraws, they often remain present informally. Sometimes daughters formally assume leadership roles while key decisions continue to be influenced by the SenGen. Daughters might assume responsibility without being recognized as the final decision-makers. This can weaken the daughter's authority and strain both business operations and family relationships.

Here is what can help:

- Early and explicit clarification of roles, responsibilities, and decision rights
- A time-limited period when the daughter and SenGen share leadership responsibilities, but with a clearly defined handover point
- A deliberate transition from the daughter role to the role of business leader
- Transparent communication of responsibilities toward employees and external stakeholders
- Supporting the SenGen in "learning to let go" and establishing binding agreements on their post-handover role

Unclear roles and responsibilities often result in persistent ambiguity, constraining leadership effectiveness and prolonging transition phases between daughters and the SenGen.

The Handover and Succession Process

Without clear milestones, timelines, and formal handover steps, no one knows exactly when leadership, authority, and ownership will transfer—or how to measure progress. This uncertainty makes planning and decision-making harder for the successor and for stakeholders inside and outside the business. A well-structured succession process reduces confusion by making each step visible, aligning expectations, and organizing the handover across time and roles. This is especially important for daughters, who often need to establish their authority more clearly during the transition.

Key success levers include:

- Early planning with clear milestones and timelines
- Contractual regulation of the handover, ownership shares, and decision rights
- Transparent involvement of siblings and other relevant stakeholders
- Definition of contingency, representation, and escalation arrangements
- Avoidance of prolonged transition phases without formally assigned decision rights

A clearly structured handover process protects daughters from being caught in prolonged interim arrangements and supports the transition from nominal responsibility to effective leadership authority.

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Conflicts are not the exception in succession processes; they are the norm. What matters is not *avoiding* conflict, but handling it constructively and with clear governance. Daughters often face the challenge of addressing substantive disagreements without causing lasting damage to family relationships.

A conflict tends to intensify when business decisions are interpreted as personal criticism or when family issues spill into operational decision-making. A clear separation between task-related issues and relationship dynamics therefore becomes a critical success factor – both for business decisions and relationship quality. This is especially true for daughters, whose decisions are more often interpreted in relational rather than purely functional terms.

Effective communication structures are characterized by:

- A clear distinction between family matters and business issues
- Clearly defined formats for feedback and conflict resolution
- Open, respectful, and audience-appropriate communication
- Acceptance of disagreement combined with the ability to make decisions
- Help from advisers for entrenched conflicts

Unaddressed conflicts weaken decision-making and place lasting strain on family relationships. Constructive conflict handling, by contrast, supports both effective leadership and relational stability during succession.

Leadership and Corporate Culture

The entry of a successor often marks the beginning of a cultural transition. Daughters are challenged to respect established structures and leadership practices while simultaneously setting their own direction. Leadership is primarily perceived through observable behavior, decision patterns, and consistency in day-to-day actions. In practice, daughters are often subject to heightened scrutiny: Their decisions are examined more closely, and leadership styles are more openly commented on. This makes it especially important to clearly communicate one's leadership role and decision logic.

Here is what can help:

- Clearly articulating one's leadership role and underlying leadership principles
- Fostering accountability and transparency
- Actively involving employees in change processes
- Embedding clear governance and decision-making routines
- Developing a consistent leadership style aligned with one's personality

This means that daughters shape culture primarily through consistent leadership behavior rather than formal authority. For employees, this provides a reliable point of orientation and supports trust in the successor's leadership.

Professional Qualifications

Professional competence is a key source of legitimacy – both internally and externally. External work experience strengthens professional expertise and confidence in

making independent decisions, including whether to accept or decline succession. For daughters, it reduces the risk of being defined primarily by family affiliation. In practice, external experience increases acceptance within the business and reinforces perceived professional legitimacy. This is particularly relevant as daughters are often expected to demonstrate higher levels of qualification and experience than sons to achieve comparable recognition as successors.

Key building blocks include:

- Several years of relevant professional experience outside the family business
- Targeted education in leadership, strategy, and organizational management
- Structured onboarding into internal processes and decision-making logics
- Sharing experience and knowledge within the company, particularly with SenGens
- Using mentoring, coaching, or time-limited leadership tandems

Professional qualification strengthens daughters' ability to act confidently in situations of heightened scrutiny. It supports independent decision-making and clarifies their professional standing within the succession process.

Networks, Exchange and Role Models

Networks give daughters useful comparisons, emotional support, and practical guidance. Access to strong networks and visible female role models is especially important for daughters in family businesses. General business networks can be valuable, but they may not address the specific challenges daughters face around identity, legitimacy, family expectations, and leadership roles. Connecting with other female successors can give daughters a space to discuss shared experiences and learn from one another. Business-owning families can help by making introductions, encouraging outside work experience, and supporting connections beyond the family and the business.

Here are some of the most useful benefits of networks:

- Engagement with mentors and peers who have personal succession experience
- Confidential spaces for reflection away from the family and the business
- Deliberate selection of a small number of high-

quality, relevant networks

- Targeted integration of external perspectives into strategic decision-making
- Regular exchange within trusted networks of female successors and entrepreneurs

Such exchange helps daughters put experiences into perspective and explore alternatives without immediate pressure to act. This reduces emotional pressure and supports more deliberate decision-making. Access to role models and supportive networks further expands daughters' range of action and strengthens their ability to position themselves within the business context.

Balancing Family and Business

Balancing leadership and family life is not a personal weakness. It centers on how the succession process is designed. Daughters are often expected to succeed in both roles fully, without clear discussion of trade-offs or support. A sustainable succession therefore requires clear decisions about work arrangements, responsibilities, and support systems. In practice, this means agreeing on how time will be used, what level of availability is realistic, and what support is needed. Without these agreements, daughters may quietly take on both leadership and family duties, creating growing pressure over time.

Key success factors include:

- Flexible work and leadership models
- Use of internal and external support structures where available
- Deliberate prioritization of personal life and career decisions
- An equal partnership with consciously shared family responsibilities
- Open communication about life plans, role expectations, and priorities

Deliberately addressing these issues allows daughters to establish sustainable arrangements that support both leadership responsibility and family life over time, rather than relying on implicit expectations.

Conclusion

Intra-family succession in family businesses is undergoing a fundamental shift. Daughters are increasingly perceived as potential and credible successors – not as exceptions. At the same time, succession by daughters is often associated with

challenges that arise well before the formal handover. Succession thus proves to be not a single transition, but an identity- and relationship-based developmental process.

Sustainable succession succeeds where responsibility is transferred step by step, roles are clearly defined, and daughters are recognized as independent entrepreneurial actors. When these processes are unclear or unspecified, tensions arise that can delay or destabilize the transition. Succession by daughters therefore indicates how capable business families are of learning and evolving through transitions. Successful succession involving daughters depends on deliberate reflection, role clarity, and early process design, well before formal transfer decisions are made.

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[¹] The findings presented in this article are derived from the practical guide by Casparý and Rusen (2025) and are based on the experience of the Witten Institute for Family Business (WIFU) in Witten/Germany, as well as on the authors' direct involvement in supporting daughters throughout succession and handover processes.