

Why Family Business Founders Struggle to Step Back During Succession

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Founder resistance is often more complicated than control. Empathy can help families understand what founders are trying to protect — and what their continued involvement may be preventing.

Founders are often asked what they will do after they step back.

It is a reasonable question. Some founders do need help imagining a meaningful next chapter. They may need new roles, new projects, new routines, or new ways to contribute.

But asking founders what they will do next often comes before they have had a chance to understand the internal conflict that makes stepping back so difficult. One part of them may want the business to grow beyond them. Another part may still feel responsible for protecting what they built.

That conflict can be hard to see clearly from the outside. A founder may say they want the next generation to take more responsibility but then continue to override decisions. They may agree that the business needs stronger management but still insert themselves into day-to-day issues. They may support succession in principle, while questioning whether anyone else is truly ready.

To family members, this can feel frustrating. To successors, it can feel discouraging. To advisors and board members, it can look like resistance, control, or lack of trust.

Sometimes those descriptions are accurate. But often there is more going on. The founder may be trying to

protect something important.

Why Pressure Doesn't Work

The part of the founder that wants to hold on may carry standards, memory, loyalty, judgment, and responsibility. That part may remember difficult years that others did not experience. It may know how fragile the business once was. It may worry that others who want authority do not yet understand the weight of ownership.

Another part may know that staying too central creates its own risks. If every important decision still depends on the founder, the next generation cannot fully develop. Senior leaders may hesitate to lead. The board may remain too deferential. Family members may wait for the founder's approval instead of learning how to think together.

Both sides may contain wisdom.

That is why simply telling the founder to “let go” often does not work. It can make the protective side of the founder more alert. The founder may feel misunderstood, judged, or pushed aside. The more others press for movement, the more the founder may feel the need to hold on.

Family members and advisors often describe these founders as meddling or micromanaging. That language may capture the frustration others feel, and the behavior may genuinely be limiting the development of successors. But those words rarely help the founder think more clearly.

From the founder's side, staying involved may feel like responsibility, protection, or care. The involvement is often strongest in the area of the business where the founder once made the greatest contribution. A founder who built the company through sales may have

particular difficulty stepping back from sales and marketing. If that function is now led by a family member, the business concern may be mixed with questions of trust, authority, and family role.

The challenge is to help the founder see both realities: what they are trying to protect, and what their continued involvement may be preventing.

Founders also hear another familiar warning: “You can’t just play golf every day.” That may be well intended, but it frames the problem too narrowly. The issue is not simply whether leisure will be satisfying. The issue is what happens when a founder is no longer the central organizing force in the business they built.

More experienced advisors often recognize that the founder is facing a loss of identity. That is an important insight. For many founders, the business has not simply been a job. It has been a source of purpose, authority, relationships, and daily evidence that they matter.

But naming the identity issue does not, by itself, help the founder think clearly about succession. When the loss feels too large, mixed feelings can quickly turn into delay, criticism of successors, or renewed control.

The Power of Empathy

This is one place empathy can become a practical tool. In succession conversations, empathy is not simply about being kind or understanding how the founder feels. Used well, empathy helps put the founder’s internal conflict into words in a way the founder can recognize.

For example:

“Part of you knows the business needs to grow beyond your direct involvement. And part of you still feels responsible for protecting what you built.”

A statement like that does not solve the succession problem, but it can change the quality of the conversation. It helps the founder hear both sides of the conflict without being forced to choose too quickly. It makes the mixed feelings more visible and less confusing. It can reduce some of the internal noise that makes good judgment harder.

Once both sides are named, they can be examined. The conversation can move away from: *“When are you finally going to step back?”* toward: *“What would need*

to be true for stepping back to feel responsible rather than reckless?”

That is a better question. It invites the founder to identify the conditions that would make succession safer. Those conditions might include clearer decision rights, stronger reporting, a more active board, better preparation for successors, outside coaching, or a gradual shift in role. It also helps separate care from control.

Many founders experience control as an expression of care. They stay close because they care about the company, the employees, the customers, and the family’s future. If others frame succession as “getting the founder out of the way,” the founder may hear that as an invitation to care less.

A better question is: *“How does your care for the business need to be expressed at this stage?”*

At one stage, care may have looked like direct involvement in every important decision. At another stage, care may need to look like developing others, strengthening governance, clarifying authority, and allowing the business to become less dependent on one person.

The founder does not have to stop caring. The founder has to find a new way to care.

How Others Can Help

Family members, advisors, and boards can make a real difference by recognizing when the founder needs a better place to think about what they are protecting, what they may be limiting, and what the business now needs. That takes patience, especially when it would be easier to focus only on titles, timelines, estate plans, org charts, and next chapters.

Until that ambivalence is brought into awareness, a succession plan may remain fragile. It may look good on paper but fail in practice because the founder has not yet come to terms with what stepping back means.

Families, boards, and advisors should not become amateur therapists. But they can notice when the issue is no longer only technical. The same questions keep being reopened; the founder agrees in principle but reverses course; or successors remain stuck waiting for real authority.

Progress often begins only when the founder can see both what they are trying to protect and what their continued involvement may be preventing.

Succession in a family business is rarely just a transfer of authority. It is also a transition in identity, responsibility, and relationship. Founders are not only giving up tasks. They may be giving up centrality, daily purpose, and a familiar way of protecting what they built.

That does not mean founders should be allowed to delay succession indefinitely. Families and boards still have a responsibility to protect the long-term health of the enterprise. But they are more likely to succeed if they understand the nature of the “stuckness” they are trying to address. The goal is to help the founder make sense of what it means for the business to grow beyond them.

When that happens, succession becomes less of a forced exit and more of a developmental achievement. The business becomes stronger because it is no longer dependent on one person. The next generation has room to develop confidence and capability. The board can play a more active role. The founder can remain connected to the legacy without having to control every decision.

In family business succession, empathy can do more than soften a difficult conversation. Used well, it helps people think more clearly when mixed feelings are making good judgment harder.

And sometimes, that is what allows the transition to move.