

Over My Dead Body: The Unseen Influence of Wives on Succession

Barbara Cosson (Swinburne University of Technology)
Michael Gilding (Flinders University)

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Women, Succession, Family Business Review.

Around the world, women have risen to the upper echelons of family businesses. But among women who are wives of the family business leader, even those involved in the business themselves, attitudes towards having their children assume leadership can be complicated and have real implications on succession and succession planning.

That's the main insight from our [in-depth study](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08944865211051148) (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08944865211051148) of 34 wives from Australian family-owned firms, which included long interviews with wives, some of them active in the business and others who were behind the scenes.

Our research showed us that women can play a visible role in shaping succession decisions – or an equally powerful invisible role that can be just as, if not even more, powerful. And their children will be equally influenced by what they do as well as what they say: for example, they may hear their mother encourage them to chart their own path but are more likely to join the family firm if they see that mom is involved herself.

We also saw that wives' attitudes towards the business, their own roles, marriage, and mothering also influence how deeply they immerse the children in the business from an early age, and the signals they send to the kids about what to study in college and how to direct their careers. Their explicit or unseen influence can complicate a family business's succession plans.

As an example, one family business advisor (consulted during the study) told the story of how a succession plan fell apart after the founder's wife, upon learning the plans, declared that it would happen "over my dead body." She had never been involved in the business before, and no one consulted her, but she clearly had opinions about who should take over.

Our Research

Many other researchers have explored the influence of "spouses" on family firms, but not wives specifically. Researchers have found that spouses play an important role as the "glue" that keeps a family together and protects its members. While the concept of what constitutes a "family" has changed due to divorce and remarriage, same-sex marriage and changing role expectations, the experience for wives remains stubbornly different from that of male spouses. Wives are regarded as the "trust catalyst" and the "emotional guardian" of the family business. And while scholars have studied how mothers affect their children's career decisions, few have studied how (as wives and mothers) they influence succession plans in family businesses.

Wives matter because of their often-invisible power in shaping family values and norms that are adopted by their children and later reinforced; as mothers they help shape and teach their children what it means to be a disciplined family member and steward and support their ongoing learning through life. Research also speaks of the profound importance of parents for their children's career choices.

We sought out businesses that would allow us to do a deep dive into how the founders' wives viewed the business and their children's involvement. We interviewed 34 CEOs and wives at 29 businesses across Australia, including women who co-founded the business with their husbands; others who served as CEOs; some who worked in another capacity; and some who were not involved in the business at all.

Four Types of Family Business Wives

Through our research we discovered that wives of

family business leaders fell into one of four types, with different attitudes towards involving children in succession plans:

Pioneers

About a third of the women we interviewed are “Pioneers,” who are actively involved in the business and encourage their children to get involved too. Most of them also do the lion’s share of homemaking and child-rearing, and immerse the children in the business from an early age. As the children get older, these wives help create a welcoming and inclusive environment for them at the office. While they encourage the children to join the firm, they also give their children a choice. Said one: “I really want what’s ideal for them to be the ideal, as far as their involvement in the business is concerned.”

Doubters

Doubters, like Pioneers, are heavily involved in the business but are not sure the kids would thrive in it. About a third of our participants were Doubters. Significantly, most of them deferred to their husbands, who were far more powerful in the business than they were, but expressed misgivings about it. And they worried that the husband’s total involvement in the business might not be a good fit for their children. Said one: “I want [our children] to enjoy what they’re doing and if it means not being in the family business it’s fine.” Despite this ambivalence most of the Doubters’ children had joined the family firm, suggesting that the wives had become unintentional role models no matter what they felt. Still, they are not wholehearted cheerleaders of family continuity in the firms’ leadership.

Traditionalists

Unlike Pioneers or Doubters, wives who are Traditionalists don’t work in the business -- but they encourage their children to do so. They fill unofficial roles such as “chief trust officer” and “peacemaker.” Like Pioneers, they support their children’s immersion in the business at an early age, and later encourage their children’s progress in the business. At the same time, unlike Pioneers, they are not able to facilitate their children’s progress in the business themselves. While they don’t overtly urge their children to join the family firm, they provide moral support. They feel privileged to have married into a prosperous family and see involvement in the family business as a privilege, especially for their sons. Because they are not involved in the business themselves, they are not role models for daughters who want to join the firm.

Disruptors

The last group, Disruptors, were not involved in the family business and did not want their children to be involved either. Some are traditional homemakers and others have their own careers. Disruptors are the most likely to scuttle succession plans: they strongly encourage their children NOT to enter the family business. They do nothing to immerse the children in the family business, and actively promote the opportunities in other fields. This can be a source of contention with their husbands – in fact, a few of our interviews with Disruptors took on a confessional quality. Some Disruptors also actively seek to distance their husbands from the rest of the family, which they regard as “toxic” in its effect.

Takeaways

Our study reveals several actionable takeaways for family businesses and their advisors, especially when it comes to succession and succession planning:

- It is too easy to think of incumbents and successors in narrow terms without considering their role as husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Discussions about succession that sit only with the founder and potential successors overlook how the observations, insights, opinions, values, and demands of wives can fundamentally shape succession. Ignoring wives places the succession process at risk.
- Children are molded and inculcated by their moms. Wives and moms play an influential role through the lifespan of the children and family business, whether that role is acknowledged or not. As a result, wives and moms exercise enormous influence over their children’s vocational choices and career aspirations. In turn, their relationship to the business and their husband shapes their encouragement (or discouragement) of children joining the business.
- Wives and moms influence their children’s vocational choices not only through what they say but also what they do – especially what they do in the business. This is partly because wives and moms serve as role models, for daughters especially. In the context of the business, it is also because their involvement in the business places them in a position to provide informed

and instrumental support for their children as they make their way in the business.

- Wives and moms are at the cutting edge of profound social changes, which have the effect of promoting marriage, family and career as vehicles for personal self-actualization. In this context, wives and moms often act as advocates for children's choice in their vocational and career pathways, whether in the business or outside it. This provides an important opportunity for inclusive family conversations about succession planning, in the broadest sense.

Explore the Research

“Over My Dead Body: Wives’ Influence in Family Business Succession,”

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/08944865211051148>) by Barbara Cosson and Michael Gilding. Family Business Review, October 2021.