



# Grabbing Hold: Suggestions for Next Gens

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I recently interviewed a successor, or next gen, who worked in a successful family business. They told me, in response to my question: How is your career path in the business progressing? “My dad and uncle keep telling me I need to grab hold. What else can I do?? I was asked to take a job elsewhere after college – try out a different company, a different boss. I moved two states away to a great role. I learned a ton. I moved up the ladder – even stayed a few years longer than I planned. I really enjoyed it. But I had the family business “bug.” I sent a proposal to my dad and uncle about a role I thought I could fill back home. They accepted – invited me back. I took a bit of a pay cut but my husband and I were okay with that. It was worth it to be in our home state, around family. That was three years ago. Despite the invitation and their agreement that I’m doing a great job, I’m questioned at every turn. Decisions that they said (out loud!) were mine are changed, without me knowing. I’m not even asked – I just find out later. It is so frustrating. I’m not sure how much longer I can do this.”

Variations of this story are common. The next gen believes they’re stepping up. Taking responsibility, proving themselves. And, the senior gen continues to behave as if they don’t believe the next gen is responsible and committed. How can next gens, respectfully, prove they’re ready? Here are some ideas:

**1. Earn it. Put in the time and effort required to operate, lead and (potentially) own your family business.**

Learn from parents, uncles, older cousins and siblings. Learn all you can about financials, business management and family dynamics. Build relationships.

Understand that if you’re learning, taking on more responsibility over time and gaining confidence, you are “earning” it... earning more responsibility, more decision-making. At the same time, some parents are micromanagers – they can have unreasonable or unspoken expectations. How do you know the difference? Work on your self-awareness. And, find one or two non-family mentors – folks you trust who can give you honest (and sometimes tough) feedback on your own progress and capabilities.

**2. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Model what you expect – especially when no one else will.**

Take the extra time, even though your plate is full, to both share and listen. Share what’s important to you, why you prioritized a particular job that day, how you’re feeling

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about the progress you’re making within your business role. And, listen! Ask questions like, “If you had one thing you could go back and do over, what would it be?” Or, “What time in the business were you most worried?” Some of those senior gens aren’t big talkers. Make it your own little challenge – when do they seem most open to conversations? What kinds of topics get the most responses? How can you be the team member who is weaving a strong fabric of trust and shared understanding among family and key employees?

**3. If necessary, lead succession by being an influencer. DO NOT wait for “this to all be yours...someday.”**

The senior gen may never address succession. Their fears – loss of control, loss of income, loss of identity, loss of stature – may prevent them from embracing the profound challenge of watching someone who isn’t as good as them take on a job they love and excel at. IF your parents are the biggest barrier to succession planning, use all your extra resources to figure out what’s holding them back. Ask people they trust what might be getting in their way. And, if you can find the right time, ask them something like, “You say continuing this business is really important. And, it seems like planning for that is really hard for you. In fact, some of your behaviors feel to me like they’re actually directly opposite of ensuring succession. Can I share a couple of those with you?”

**4. Be ready when they (finally) say, “Let’s get started.”**

Don’t get bitter. Do what you can with what you have where you are. And, if you feel yourself putting too much of your professional

or personal life on hold, like the daughter in the opening example, start thinking about what life might look like if you didn’t work in the family business. Successful succession does not always mean everyone works and owns happily together. Sometimes success means that family relationships can grow because family are NOT working or owning together. Just because you don’t work together doesn’t mean you’re not family.

I have often told the senior generation, “This succession stuff is some of the hardest work you’ll ever do.” Next gens – I know this process can be awfully hard on you, too. If I could pick one action item from above, I’d suggest finding one or two trusted folks to serve as your sounding board. Sometimes, as a successor, your pace is too fast, your expectations unrealistic, your skills not yet developed. And, sometimes, your folks will never get out of the way. Usually, the truth lies somewhere in between those two scenarios. And, when you’re in the thick of it, it’s awfully hard to find that truth. Lean on “outsiders” who can take away some of the emotion and help you see the situation more objectively. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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