



Letting Go...

by Avoiding the Identity Trap

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“We’re really lucky. Dad created this business, welcomed us both back and then taught us to be good owners. He encouraged our teamwork and coached us...but let us make decisions and mistakes. He’s still here, most days. He’s got an office and he gives us good advice. And he got out of the way and allowed us to build this business beyond what he’d ever imagined.”



I have heard several variations of this story from sibling teams as they describe a senior generation that shifted ownership and leadership gracefully and effectively. These teams now focus substantial energy on all the “normal” complexities that go with transition. Namely: Are owners aligned on what they want and need from the business? Is the company performing well enough financially to be transitioned? Are we in an industry that offers enough opportunity? Do we have successors that are capable? Do we have a successor team that works effectively together? How do we mitigate tax liability?

More often, though, I am working with a family business team whose senior generation hasn't yet let go. And it's causing challenges above and beyond those typical complexities. Which is really quite normal – letting go is very hard work.

One Barrier to Letting Go – Your Identity

“One way or another, most people in transition have the experience of no longer being quite sure of who they are.” William Bridges.

Bridges, an American author, speaker and consultant shifted the way people and organizations think about change and transition. Change, Bridges believed, happens to people. Transition, he observed, is internal: it's what happens inside people's minds when they're presented with change.

And for those who are working to transition from leader to coach, from owner to part time employee or from someone with a high degree of control to watching the decisions get made by others...who they are, or their very identity, is at stake.

An individual's identity as a leader of a family businesses often eclipses all other roles that individual might hold – father, aunt, brother, son, friend, fisherman, volunteer, board member

As departing leaders face the challenge of having little experience with these other roles they can shift to in the future, they also face very specific losses associated with giving up the “leader” role. For example, they are likely losing their identity as a decision-maker and authority figure, benefits, and sometimes even their purpose.

So, what can you do to be applauded like the senior gen in the opening story? How can you be the family business leader who gave up control and authority, transitioned to being a coach and truly enjoys watching the next generation do your job, at some levels, better than you have?

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Avoid the Identity Trap

1. Acknowledge that you might have committed extensively to one role.

Begin to assess how many (or few) roles you may have to transition to by determining how significant your work role is within your life.

2. Make a plan for expanding into new roles.

Even if you haven't sacrificed every role in the name of leading and building a business, it will still serve your transition well to be intentional about where you want to spend your time in three or seven or 15 years. In that future, do you want to increase the time spent on being a wife or mother? Perhaps a caregiver for grandkids or parents? What about fulfilling your purpose through service rather than business – could you share a special hands-on skill? Spend a bit of time envisioning that future.

3. Specifically define your reduced role in the business.

With your partners and successors, get formal about the hours you'll work, what decisions you will give up and when, where you'll office and what title you'll have. This exercise is usually awkward. Even if senior gen had a job description, the detail required here is at a level that will make you squirm.

Next gens – if your first thought on reading this is to leave the magazine open to this article on someone else's desk, I encourage you to do this exercise yourself, first. Healthy habits, started early, grow fast – think of compound interest. Then, to bring it to your

senior gen, you might start the conversation by noting how aligned you believe your goals are: namely, continued family business leadership and ownership. IF that goal is aligned across generations, it should provide the opening to discuss how you see that joint goal being achieved.

The identity trap, while not the only barrier to family business transition, is a particularly challenging one. As those with their identity tied up in the business face change, it tends to look like the “end of the line,” rather than a door opening to something new. Often, this causes them to focus a lot on what they need...rather than what the business needs. As one leader, struggling with his transition, said to me, “I know I need to ask,

“What does the company need from me?” And, what happens if that prevents me from doing what I love?” Being deliberate about defining a new non-business role and detailing your (possibly reduced) business role can be a great start to preventing feeling stuck in an identity trap. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*For help on #1 above, consider completing the “Centrality of Work Role” assessment from the book *Transitioning from the Top* by Stephanie Brun de Pontet.*