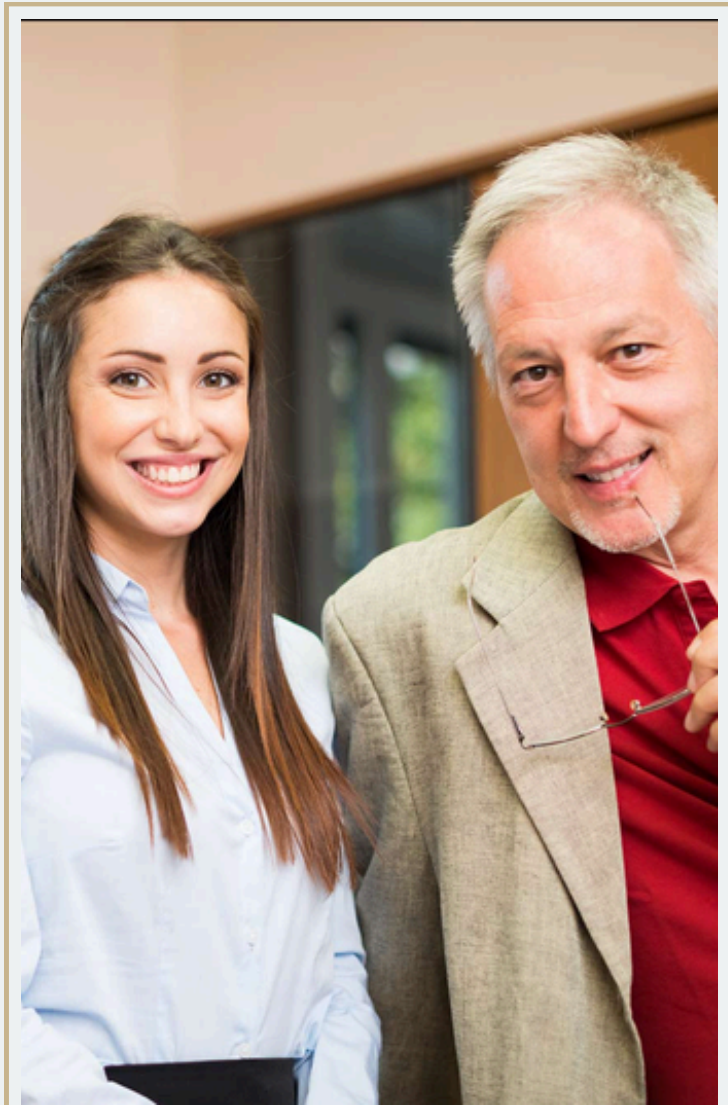


Family Business: Privilege, Poison, or Purpose?

Should You Join Your Family Business?

Joining a family business is one of the most important decisions a rising-generation member can make. For some, it is a matter of when and how. But for many, it is a matter of why: Is the opportunity a privilege? Could it poison their career and happiness? Or could it offer a path to greater purpose? Most rising gens feel some of each as they decide if joining is right for them.

The decision has two sides. The rising gen must choose the business, and the business must choose the rising gen. Family membership may open the door, but it should not guarantee entry or determine the role. Nor does joining the family enterprise have to mean becoming its next CEO. A rising gen might contribute as an employee, executive, engaged owner, or board member. Treating these paths as interchangeable is often where confusion begins.





Rising gens may join because they want to, feel obligated, would incur financial or emotional costs by not joining, or see no better alternative ([Sharma & Irving, 2005](#)). These motivations help explain the three paths described in this article. Joining is a privilege when it offers an opportunity the rising gen freely chooses and is prepared to earn. It becomes poison when pressure, dependence, or poor fit traps the rising gen in the wrong path. It provides purpose when the person's interests and abilities align with work that moves the enterprise forward. Families should therefore be candid about why the rising gen wants to join, how well the role fits, and what both sides expect before making a commitment.

Privilege

A well-run, successful family business can attract top-notch talent for virtually any position. So why choose a family member, especially one whose résumé may not include the experience an outsider could bring? Why risk perceptions of nepotism or entitlement? Why put healthy family relationships at risk for a job that someone else might be better prepared to fill?

The answer is simple. Family employees bring more than competency to the role. Years of exposure to the business can create tacit knowledge, trusted relationships, and a deep understanding of its history and values ([Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2018](#)). That knowledge develops over time through interactions with the senior generation, employees, advisors, and others surrounding the business. A rising gen may also bring a long-term commitment that is difficult to reproduce. When the going gets rough, that family member may come in early, leave late, and do whatever is necessary to navigate the storm. But family connection is only a potential asset. The rising gen must turn inherited access into earned credibility.

Preparation begins at home, long before a family member receives a title. High expectations paired with support are associated with successor well-being and better employee behavior, while permissive parenting can foster entitlement and highly controlling parenting can fuel impostor feelings ([Shanine et al., 2023](#)). Put simply, support without accountability can encourage entitlement, while standards without support can produce self-doubt. The strongest preparation combines both.

That's the privilege. But it comes with responsibility. Rising gens need room to develop their own judgment and identity, along with expectations that build competence, discipline, and humility. Preparation should be deliberate and may include outside experience, rotational assignments, continuing education, coaching, or a clearly defined development plan ([Reif et al., 2025](#)). Privilege without responsibility isn't privilege at all. It's just risk with a family name attached.



Poison

Privilege can become poison when a role is built around the family relationship rather than the needs of the person and the business. The risk usually begins with bad fit, bad process, or bad family dynamics.

Bad fit occurs when a rising gen enters a role that does not suit their abilities, interests, or career goals, or when the business creates a position for a family member that it does not genuinely need. Commitment does not eliminate the need for competence, and competence does not create genuine interest—the willingness-versus-ability dilemma in successor selection ([Richards et al., 2019](#)). When either is missing, the opportunity can stunt the rising gen's development while burdening the company and its employees.

Bad process occurs when expectations remain unstated. A rising gen may assume that employment will lead to ownership or leadership; the senior generation may believe it promised none of those things. Before the rising gen joins, both sides need to discuss the role, standards for success and advancement, what has actually been decided about future ownership or leadership, and how governance may change as more relatives become owners.

Bad family dynamics arise when favoritism, sibling rivalry, parental indulgence, resentment, or unequal treatment follow family members into the workplace and spread dysfunction into the business. This is how a “bad seed” can be cultivated—not because someone was born bad, but because years of indulgence, protection from consequences, or resentment are carried into the company ([Kidwell et al., 2024](#)).

Most importantly, every decision to join should include an exit plan. What happens if the role is not working? Can the rising gen pursue a career elsewhere while preserving family relationships and, when applicable, remain a responsible owner? Planning for a respectful departure protects both the family and the business, and reduces the danger that an opportunity will eventually feel like a trap.

Purpose

Purpose begins with choice. Growing up in an enterprising family can provide unusual opportunities to learn, contribute, and carry something meaningful forward. Yet career planning in family firms often serves the business's goals more than the individual family member's goals ([Achtenhagen et al., 2022](#)). That gravitational pull can make it difficult for rising gens to separate their aspirations from family expectations. The important issue is not simply the family business's purpose. It is how well working there fits the rising gen's own purpose.



For rising gens whose interests, abilities, and identity align with the family enterprise, it can be the opportunity of a lifetime. Successor confidence and support from the incumbent can foster the intrinsic motivation that helps move succession toward completion ([Gagné et al., 2021](#)). Purpose grows from confidence, support, and choice—not pressure. Conversely, a calling that cannot be declined is really an obligation.

But purpose has to work both ways. The business's purpose and the rising gen's purpose must point in the same direction. That requires family firm leaders to communicate honestly about their plans. An ownership group looking for a liquidity event paired with a rising gen expecting a succession plan is a recipe for disaster, no matter how much passion either side brings to the table.

Even when purpose aligns, it is not a panacea. When a rising gen's identity becomes tied to the enterprise, disagreements over role, ownership, or succession can feel like rejection by both the business and the family. If rising gens are encouraged to build their careers there, family firm leaders owe them clarity about what is—and is not—being offered.

Rising gens committed to the family enterprise also need to consider where they can exert the most positive influence. That could be a role in operations, as an engaged owner, or on the board. Purpose does not require a particular title, and choosing not to work in the business does not necessarily mean turning away from the family enterprise.

Questions to Ask Before Saying Yes

The three Ps suggest these questions a rising gen should ask before joining:

- Why do I want to join, and how much of that desire is truly my own?
- What capabilities and experience do I bring, and what must I still develop?
- What exactly is being offered now: a position, responsibilities, compensation, and a career path—and what remains only a future possibility?
- What, if anything, has been decided about future ownership or leadership?
- Do my goals align with my parents' and the family firm leadership's plans for the business?
- How will success be defined, and will the standards be clear and fair to family and nonfamily employees?
- If the role does not work, what is our exit plan, and how will we protect our family relationships?

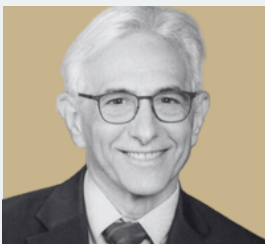


Conclusion

Be thoughtful. Make no assumptions. Have the difficult conversations about motivation, fit, expectations, ownership, and an exit plan before joining. None of this guarantees success, but avoiding these conversations makes misunderstanding and regret far more likely. The best outcome is not always joining the family business. Sometimes it is a deliberate yes; sometimes it is a respectful no; and sometimes it is finding a different way to contribute. Businesses come and go. Family endures. Protect the family first.

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