

Making the Most of the Moment When a Nextgen Joins the Family Business



By Amy J. Katz

The offer of a first job is a major milestone for many young people. The moment they accept it is exciting, for it confirms their belief in their potential, an affirmation of their skills and talents, the beginning of financial independence and the opportunity to define themselves apart from their parents.



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For young adults who decide to work in their family's business, often called "nextgens," the experience of accepting that first real job is quite different. For some, it is a natu-

ral progression from after-school and summer jobs at the business, and a fulfillment of expectations that were clear from early childhood. They make their decision with the trust that over time they will have the opportunity to develop their skills and interests and enjoy the privileges that will likely come their way.

For others, the moment comes when they decide to join the business after time spent working in other settings. They return to the business eager to share their insights and to influence and improve the business. Occasionally, the choice follows a time of questioning and doubt about whether they can work for their parents, achieve what they have achieved, and ul-

timately, whether they have the commitment and capacity to sustain the family legacy.

Whether the choice is expected or surprising, the moment of choice has lifelong implications. Dr. Megan Jay, a clinical psychologist, calls the 20s "the most defining decade of adulthood." In family businesses, a son or daughter's choice to commit to the family business is a defining moment for their parents as well. It can be their first time they understand that their children truly appreciate the family's history and that their hopes for the succession of the business might be realized.

As with many life decisions, the impact of choosing to work in one's family busi-

ness – that crucial moment – may not be felt immediately. It takes time to navigate the complexities of being in the spotlight and – rightly or wrongly – being viewed as a powerful person. So when a senior employee praises a nextgen’s contributions, it’s a sign that the choice was a good one. A brother who tells his sister, “You’re good at *that*; I’m good at *this*,” conveys the respect that is vital to an effective sibling partnerships. A daughter who has the freedom to lead a new division realizes that she can be an entrepreneur within the business. These are the experiences that build confidence in one’s choices.

Of course, there are frustrations, as with any new job. The first time a parent says firmly, “Don’t call me Dad here,” can be unsettling. A nextgen who expects a quick promotion can be stunned to receive critical feedback from a non-family supervisor. When the leadership team of a family business resists a nextgen’s push for new software, the experience can be humbling. And perhaps most difficult, a nextgen who has idealized a parent may feel disenchanted and even angry as the realization that the parent is flawed sets in.

But that moment of decision, and the learning that comes after it, while challenging at times can eventually provide both parents and their adult children a chance to recreate their relationships. In that moment of decision to join the business, nextgens can provide a way for families to renew their connection to each other and to the work and values that have shaped their lives.

What can make “the moment” a decision to celebrate for years to come? Nextgens deserve the opportunity to consider the pros and cons, to understand the expectations of their new role, and to ask about the potential for career



growth, development, salary and benefits. Parents and non-family executives can take the nextgen’s interest in working at the business seriously, without any assumptions that he or she will easily fit in. They can create thoughtful interview questions that ask the nextgen to describe their strengths and areas where development is needed. They can also create scenarios about how the position might evolve, explain employee policies and practices, and articulate clearly what success will look like. In other words, parents and other executives would do well to give nextgens the satisfaction that they have been officially hired for a specific position.

Family businesses often pride themselves on having an informal, “family” culture. But bringing in the next generation can be surprisingly disruptive for nextgens, their parents and non-family employees. By giving the nextgen the time and space to make a true decision, and by preparing the organization for the nextgen’s role, the moment a nextgen joins the family business can be a significant and joyful event that sets the stage for the future. ■

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