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## Stuck in Success: Flourishing versus the Freeze Response in Next-Gen Family Business Transitions

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*In the ‘Stuck in Success’ series, we sit down with high-performance coach Ilse Jaques to explore the harsh realities facing many successful leaders. Often referred to as the “secret agent for the 1%,” Ilse supports a select group of exceptional leaders who refuse to settle for mediocrity, guiding them toward ultimate fulfillment and results in every facet of their personal and professional lives. Her driving force is radical growth and irreversible transformation at the deepest level. In her world, success knows no bounds—because excellence is not a gift; it is a state of being and the posture of fearless winners.*

*This time, we delve deeper into the hidden mechanisms that paralyze family businesses during pivotal transitions, precisely when the next generation is called to take the helm.*

**You work with an exclusive circle of highly accomplished leaders, including the founders of flourishing family enterprises and their successors. What is it that so often obstructs a smooth, successful transition of leadership to the next generation?**

Paradoxically, it is rarely a lack of talent or strategy. More often than not, it is the very success of the family or the organization itself that creates the impasse. The structural formulas that once propelled a family business to greatness can, over time, calcify into the very frameworks that

impede future growth. Naturally, this legacy model of success has long ceased to be questioned; it has become invisible, woven into the fabric of the status quo. Consequently, next-generation leaders often find themselves with painfully little room for genuine creativity or innovation.

The founding generation has, after all, experienced firsthand what worked and what failed in the past, and they naturally seek to safeguard those winning strategies. In that respect, their experience constitutes an invaluable reservoir of institutional knowledge. Yet, this same protective instinct can cause certain assumptions, habits, or institutional “truths” to become so deeply embedded that they are seldom explicitly questioned or re-evaluated. Because the incoming generation invariably operates from a place of profound respect and loyalty for what has been built, their new perspectives or refreshing angles often struggle to gain traction or legitimacy. This is rarely born out of malice or stubbornness—or at least, usually not—but simply because both generations, guided by their finest intentions and insights, are fiercely striving for the continuity and growth of the enterprise.

**It sounds profoundly paradoxical: both generations deeply desire continuity and growth, yet through that very desire, they inadvertently block the perpetuation of their success. Could you elaborate on that dynamic?**

Certainly. A thriving family business does not simply materialize out of thin air. Many of the successful family enterprises dominating today’s market were forged in a crucible where sheer perseverance, risk-taking, and profound personal sacrifice were absolute prerequisites. Through that journey, the founding generation forged an extraordinary resilience and an acute sense of responsibility. Naturally, those qualities endure—even when the external landscape shifts fundamentally, as it invariably does during a next-gen transition.

At such a crossroads, we often observe a status quo bias—the conviction that ‘what has worked must not change.’ This frequently goes hand in hand with loss aversion: the subconscious belief that avoiding loss is far more critical than creating new gains. The result is indeed paradoxical, yet intensely real: the very success that once bought freedom ultimately hardens into the structure that locks freedom out.

**And that is what culminates in what you term the ‘freeze response’?**

Precisely. Beyond the well-known survival mechanisms of fight or flight, there is the freeze response. In the context of family businesses, this response frequently manifests within the intergenerational relationship. Successors may grow hesitant to make definitive new choices, while founders may waver when it comes to truly relinquishing authority. This happens, of course, because the stakes are incredibly high for everyone involved. It is a shared, mirrored dynamic.

In the undercurrent, I almost always detect the same psychological tensions: loyalty versus autonomy, gratitude versus freedom, and perhaps the most stubborn of all—preservation versus reinvention. What often forms is an invisible contract, passed down out of love, care, and a sense of responsibility. Neither the founding nor the succeeding generation is fully conscious of it. Yet, the stronger the family bond, the higher the likelihood of a collective freeze—even extending, for instance, to a stalemate among the successors themselves.

## How, then, does an intergenerational transition become highly successful?

Experience has shown me that the family businesses achieving the most successful transitions do not view this handover as a transfer of power, but rather as a transfer of trust. They are remarkably proactive in this regard, seeking external guidance to ensure that no hidden undercurrent undercuts that foundation of trust.

For the outgoing generation, a successful transition requires acknowledging that their greatest contribution to the future no longer lies solely in building the business, but in carving out space for new leadership. Their experience remains invaluable throughout this process.

For the next generation, a successful transition means stepping up to ownership of their own vision and leadership style, without disconnecting from the bedrock upon which the enterprise was built.

Ultimately, the future of a family business is not dictated by what one generation can let go of or receive, but by what both generations make possible together.



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