



The Weight of the Hand-Off

In family businesses, leadership isn't inherited—it's earned. Here's what it takes to hand off the business without losing its direction, identity, or momentum.

The legacy that matters most isn't the one you inherit. It's the one you leave behind.

LEADERSHIP IS LEASED

In a family business, ownership might be inherited—but leadership never is. It's leased. And your team renews that lease daily, based on what you model, what you manage, and what you make possible.

Credibility isn't a perk of succession. It's earned through decisions that serve the business—not the ego, not the legacy, not the family script. That means stepping into the messier spaces. Taking initiative before you're asked. Letting your judgment speak louder than your last name.

THE HARDEST CONVERSATIONS ARE THE MOST ESSENTIAL

Everyone talks about how succession requires communication. Fewer talk about the conversations most families avoid:

- What decisions no longer belong to the founder?
- What's the plan if the next generation doesn't want to take over?
- How will power shift in a downturn—or after a major mistake?
- What happens if the founder wants to reassert control?
- Who, ultimately, has the authority to say “we're doing it this way”?

Avoiding these questions doesn't protect relationships. It postpones the fallout. Tension is not a threat to the business. Silence is.

FIVE SIGNS THE TRANSITION ISN'T HAPPENING—YET

It's easy to say a handoff is underway. But is it?

Here's what functional transitions have in place:

1. Decision-making authority is clear—both inside and outside the family.
2. Roles are written down, reviewed, and respected.
3. The founder has visibly stepped away from at least one key responsibility.
4. Conflict isn't handled privately and emotionally—but through a shared process.
5. The new leader is making visible, independent calls—and being held accountable for them.

If even two of these are missing, the transition is likely stalled.

LET THE BUSINESS GROW PAST YOU

A true handoff isn't about stepping away—it's about building something that runs stronger without your constant presence. For founders, that means creating space. For successors, that means stepping forward with the steadiness to lead and the humility to keep learning.

Because in the end, no one owns leadership. They simply carry it well enough that others choose to follow.

MAKE THE SHIFT BEFORE YOU'RE FORCED TO

Transitions made under pressure rarely serve anyone well. Don't wait for burnout, illness, or resentment to force the conversation. Whether you're preparing to step back or step in, take one step now: define one decision you're ready to release—or ready to own. Leadership isn't a ceremony. It's a series of choices. Start making them while you still have the benefit of each other's trust.

NOT SURE WHERE TO START? TALK TO US FIRST.

Succession planning is complex—but you don't have to figure it out alone. As your industry association, PIA MidAmerica confidentially helps members explore transitions, connect with trusted partners, and protect what they've built.



For practical tools and deeper insights, download our Beyond the Page guide: “Preserving the Legacy: A Practical Guide to Succession in Print.”

Bit.ly/pia-summer25-print

PIA
MIDAMERICA
PRINTING & IMAGING ASSOCIATION

piamidam.org