

# FAMILY BUSINESS NEWSLETTER

## Laws Whiskey House A Unique and Immersive Experience

When you begin a distillery tour at Laws Whiskey House, they don't just want you to learn about the whiskey making process — they want you to have an experience worthy of the “World's Best Small Batch Bourbon” as the 2024 World Whiskies Awards indicate.

“I've always loved whiskey,” said Al Laws, founder and owner of Laws Whiskey House in Denver. “I have always enjoyed American bourbon even though I grew up in Canada,” he grinned.

Every tour begins with guests gathered on discarded church pews Al found for free. As he prepares to open his new facility with a larger tasting room and full cocktail bar, he kept it in the family by hand-building new pews with the help of his stepfather.

“It was really important to me to build this part of the experience myself,” said Al. “With the new pews and a large cathedral-like window, I want whiskey enthusiasts to have a unique experience exploring all things whiskey.”

After a crash course in the whiskey-making process, you're taken on a tour of the distillery to see it in action. Between the fragrance of mash, the heat from the steaming pots, and the sight of bubbling yeast, it's truly an immersive experience. In the spirit of a family-run business, Laws Whiskey uses only heirloom and heritage grown grains from two Colorado family farms. With sustainability in mind, waste from the production process is then recycled as animal feed, and the cycle begins anew.

Al and wife/co-founder Marianne insist on a no shortcut approach to their business. In fact, Laws Whiskey was operating for three years before a sip of whiskey was ready to drink. Their patience, practicality and smarts — it certainly helps that Al is a former Wall Street economist — have paid off. It's undeniable their Brooklyn-baked idea worked. Marianne serves as the company's secretary and treasurer, bringing her own experience in investment banking to ensure the financial



Laws Whiskey House founder and owner Al Laws.

and administrative functions run smoothly. But the frank reality is as they've grown, so have their needs.

“It was a big change for me, coming from the high-stress finance world,” Al said. “I had to learn to relax, slow down and not scare people away with my intensity. That would be my advice to other small businesses. It's great to start out with a lot of enthusiasm, but as your business matures, you have to mature and change with it.”

Laws expands, “Now that our business is established, we need people with different skill sets. It's hard to maintain the same company culture as you expand, but it's necessary for the growth of the business. The people who helped in the beginning may not be the right fit today. Don't be afraid to make those changes.”

“It's been a nice change of pace from the corporate world,” Marianne said. “It's still hard work, but we get do it as a family. We've raised our kids alongside our business!”

Laws Whiskey House's new tasting room will open in the coming months, but if you can't make it to Denver, visit them online at [lawswhiskeyhouse.com](https://lawswhiskeyhouse.com).

# Navigating the Path: Exploring a Career in Your Family's Business

By Nicole Bettinger Zeidler

**A**re you in the early stages of your career and considering the prospect of working for your family's business?

If so, you might have encountered phrases like, "It must be nice to already have a job waiting for you!" or "This will all be yours someday." However, the reality is that deciding to work for your family business is not a straightforward decision. This article presents a roadmap to assist you in your decision-making process.

## Charting Your Path Begins with Self-Reflection

Working for the family business isn't for everyone, and that's okay! It is helpful to do a little self-reflecting when thinking about your career path, whether that may include your family's business or not.

Here are some valuable questions to help you prepare for the decision to join the family business (or when contemplating any career path):

- What interests you the most? Think not just about work or your career, but what truly excited you?
- When do you feel at your best? What are you most proud of?
- When are you not at your best? Note, if your answer to this question is when you're around family for long periods of time or walking into your family's business, working there may not be for you.
- How do you define success for yourself at this stage of your life?
- If you could do literally anything in the world, what would you do?
- What are the potential consequences and costs, including the impact on your family relationships, if things don't go as planned? What does that outcome look like?
- What is your 'why?' Go deeper and really think about your reasons for wanting to join the family business.

## Exploring Opportunities and Setting Expectations

A lot of successful family businesses have opportunities for internships or other business exposure opportunities that you can participate in well before you're thinking

about joining as a full-time employee. These experiences provide a chance for you to dip your toes in, before plunging in all the way. If your family does offer these short-term or part-time positions, take full advantage to get a taste of your family business.

It is important to know and understand the expectations of you as early as possible. This may be laid out in a family employment policy (another best practice that many family ownership groups have developed) and could include such requirements as advanced schooling, outside experience, or a promotion at a different company. You want to be sure you have a solid grasp of what these expectations are, so you don't have any surprises as you get into your career plans. If your family doesn't have an employment policy, start asking questions of your parents, grandparents, and possibly of other company leaders about what would be required, should you decide you'd like to join the business.

Even if it isn't a requirement to gain outside experience, it is still a best practice (and strongly advised) to do so. By choosing to take this step, you can learn and grow with another organization and gain some success on your own before bringing your skill set back to the family business. We recommend spending between two to five years working elsewhere in a similar industry or company, if possible. This may seem like a long time before joining your family business. In some situations or industries, the multiple year suggestion may not be necessary or fitting. The ultimate purpose is for you to gain meaningful experience and exposure before making a move into the family business.

You also want to make sure you're not using the family business as a backup plan if your original career path encounters difficulties. Gaining experience outside the family business provides valuable exposure to your chosen field, helping you gain a better understanding of what lies ahead.

## When thinking about joining the family business, don't:

- Assume because you are family, you will have any job or position you'd like.
- Wait for family to guide you. Take some initiative and ask, without being assumptive. Ask about potential internships, a family employment policy, and the hiring process.

- Assume that even if you check all the boxes, you're the best fit for the company. As you prepare to get the job, also prepare to not get the job. Plan for how you can most productively respond if this happens, like asking how you can better prepare yourself for eventual entry into the family business.

Good, open communication is critical to the success of this entire process. If considering applying to your family's business, first talk to your immediate family (whether they are in the business or not) about what effects your employment in the business could have, both the positive and the negative. What dynamics could potentially pop up?

Also, it can be helpful to speak with other family members who are current or former employees. Ask them about their overall experience, including:

- What worked well?
- What didn't work so well?
- What did their hiring process look like?

Other family employees can offer a unique perspective for working in the business. Just be careful not to judge the situation as hopeless in case their employment did not work well for them. You may be able to create a much-improved experience.

## Seeking Out Employment Within the Family Business

After you've reflected and completed your preparation, it's time to decide whether you'd like to work for your family's business. If the answer is yes, ensure that you have complied with all the necessary guidelines outlined in the family employment policy or any other relevant

document. Additionally, make sure you follow the steps outlined in such a policy, including whom to contact first to express your interest. Often, this contact person is the CEO/president or a member of the company's HR team. Avoid relying on your immediate family members to bypass an established process.

Many families require prospective family employees to apply for existing open positions that align with their skill sets. These positions are legitimate openings, not roles created solely for family members. Some families also have policies allowing family members in management roles at other companies to propose positions within the family business where they can contribute value. The specific process for this is typically outlined in the family employment policy.

## Success Starts Here: Preparing for Your First Day

### You've been hired! Now what?

Make sure you understand the relationship between employee, manager, and owner, as well as all the potential overlaps. You could very well be an employee and an owner, but not in a management position yet. Dad may be the CEO but is not your direct boss. Have conversations with other family employees about these different dynamics. Does Mom prefer to be called by her first name when at work? What boundaries would be helpful for you to have? If you have family in senior leadership, is it appropriate to come into their office unannounced, even if just for lunch? What message could that send to other employees? Talking through these expectations ahead of time can alleviate a lot of future stress and tension.



Be sure to complete any orientation and pre-first day prep or materials. On day one and subsequent days, arrive on time and be ready to work. Know and understand who you will be reporting to, while respecting that hierarchy chain. It can be useful to view the company's whole organizational structure to make sure you are also abiding by the structure.

While you may not have a say, report to a nonfamily employee when feasible. Acknowledge the potential awkwardness this may create for the nonfamily employee in that position.

## Your First 100 Days: Navigating the Early Challenges

As a family employee, co-workers may make assumptions about you and your employment. People may expect you to walk in on the first day, knowing everything about the company inside and out. Be mindful not to become entangled in this perception. Maintain an open mindset to maximize the benefits of your training and development.

**Becoming a part of your family's business can undeniably provide a positive and meaningful experience.**

It can also be easy for other employees to assume that you are a direct line of communication to company leadership, approaching you with complaints or questions about the company. It's important to clarify that even if your parent is the company leader, that is not your role. Turning them away may feel tough or even cold, or you might believe that owners or other family employees should be informed as well. It's essential to establish clear boundaries between work and family life. Allocate specific times for business discussions, separate from your family time.

Your direct supervisor or other employees might find it challenging to offer candid feedback. The ability to receive this feedback and transform it into constructive criticism is a necessary skill for a family employee. Your supervisor should feel that they can be open and honest with you without the fear of it affecting their job. Listen without interrupting, while keeping a handle on your own responses. Ask clarifying questions to demonstrate your understanding of the feedback received and take it seriously by following up on it. Once again, respect the hierarchical chain and avoid circumventing your supervisor, especially to communicate directly with a fellow family employee. This will immediately lead to them feeling undermined and unwilling to be honest with you, which can also hinder your own development.

If there isn't a plan in place for regular feedback, discuss the possibility of developing one with HR or your supervisor. Exercise caution in your approach and show respect for the existing training protocol; avoid expecting special treatment based on your family ties.

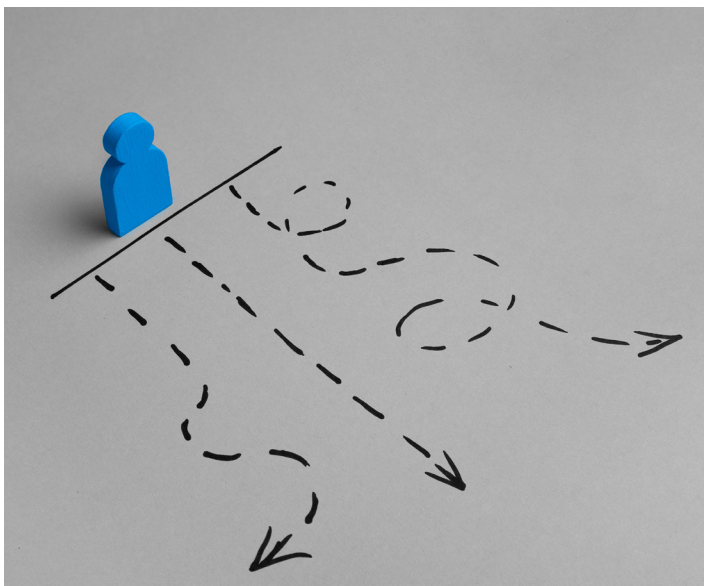
Your instinct in those first 100 days may be to try for a big splash and to suggest changes to the way things are currently being done. Your main path to success in the early part of your family business tenure will be to understand what is most important to accomplish in your present role and focus on those tasks. You should also spend time and energy building good relationships with your colleagues as well as your supervisor.

## In Closing

While this may initially sound daunting and overwhelming, it's important to note that such feelings are not the intended outcome. Becoming a part of your family's business can undeniably provide a positive and meaningful experience. With adequate preparation and thoughtful planning, you can play a significant role in contributing to its overall success.

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# Ownership 101: Preserving Your Family's Legacy Through Education

By Amy Wirtz, CEPA, JD

When it comes to ownership succession, many business-owning families spend thousands of dollars on attorneys, accountants and financial planners to help create a plan for future generations. However, this is only the beginning of transitioning the family for future ownership. The rest of the work lies in preparing the emerging generations as lifelong learners passionate about maintaining the health and prosperity of the family business system: family, business management and ownership. This can be achieved by empowering families to plan and implement family ownership education plans.

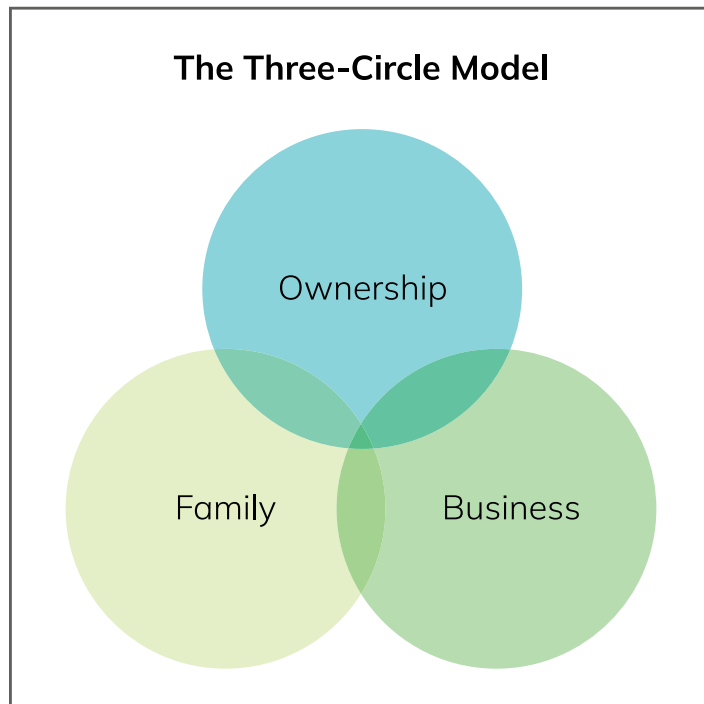


Figure 1. The Three-Circle Model of the Family Business System by Renato Tagiuri and John Davis

Where should you start with family business education? Historically, family business owners send their family, ownership group, and nonfamily executives to learning opportunities at conferences, family business centers, or educational programs. To supplement these opportunities, we encourage owners to build learning and training programs for internal education. Individualized educational programs for their family, ownership, and business systems will accelerate their learning objectives, create a unified vision for the plans, allow for team enhancement, and provide bonding opportunities.

In our work with clients, we start by helping families understand what skills are needed to support multiple generational ownership of the family business. The concepts should address the family, business management and ownership systems that family business owners balance daily. Below are examples of how we've helped other families build skill sets and tailor the learning to the needs of their systems.

## Leadership Skills

We hear this often from family owners: "I need my daughter to be a leader when she takes the helm." When mom is asked where she got her own leadership skills, the answer usually is "the School of Hard Knocks." Instead of enrolling in Hard Knocks, we try to help mom define what leadership looks like for each generation and then envision what leadership will look like in the future. It's important to begin by studying and aligning the generational perspectives. From there, we can define which skills the daughter should acquire to be a leader in the current generation's eyes.

Defining and preparing business leaders today looks very different than it did in 1980. Leadership researcher Dr. Brené Brown asked successful CEOs what about the way people are leading today needs to change to be successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment. The top answer was "braver leaders and more courageous cultures."<sup>1</sup> When asked what courage is, the same respondents all had different answers. Brown defines courage as the ability to speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences. She also teaches that delivering feedback to those we ask to courageously follow us is an essential leadership skill for future generations.

## Ownership Skills

Successful continuity planning includes preparing the emerging generation with some basic ownership knowledge including business financial accrument, negotiation skills, interpersonal communications skills, industry awareness, emotional intelligence, governance abilities, role awareness and brand awareness. What a long list!

**"Legacy is not what I did for myself. It's what I am doing for the next generation."  
-Vitor Belfort**



Do not get too overwhelmed. Through our work, we help families design a learning system to address the “hows” and “whys” of these skills. For example, many families have their CFO teach the emerging generation financial literacy topics such as balance sheets, profit and loss statements and capital expenditures. We also encourage emerging owners to shadow a family board meeting, complete internships, participate in industry programs and join peer learning opportunities for next-generation owners.

### **Family Continuity**

Many business-owning families aspire to leave a legacy of family values, create an appreciation of family history and continue a healthy family system. They want to teach the next generation how to align and define their generation’s family values — and be aware how these values will impact the family business. Families also want to preserve the past but encourage innovation and the beauty of being entrepreneurs.

The family education component can be implemented in the context of family governance planning and is stimulating and challenging work to do with young adults. Ideally, families can begin as the emerging generations start primary school and plan to increase the skills and involvement that tracks the development of the children into early adult years and beyond.

### **The Educational Process**

When creating an educational process for children in the family, the first step is to design the learning objectives for each age group. What are the minimum skills required? Which concepts are appropriate for the learners? What skills would enhance the family, ownership group and business? What will the emerging generation need that the current owning generation did not? To help shape learning objectives, we then ask what a family does not want to see in the way the next generation approaches their proposed roles in the family and the business.

Once we have established the learning objectives, we explore creating a learning methodology for each age group in the family system to transfer theory into application and experiences. This process aims to examine the type of learners we have from a developmental perspective and design the delivery of the concepts in a method that works for every kind of learner. Not everyone learns alike; learners have different styles of learning: visual (imagery), auditory (listening), print (note-takers), tactile (hands-on), interactive (group projects), and kinesthetic (must move to learn). Customization is the fun part for all because it is creative and individualized for what the children and teenagers need. Learning opportunities range from activities that hold the attention of preschoolers to engaging the

audiovisual needs of teens. Families have also seen success with teens serving as mentors to the younger children.

The needs and requirements for adult learning are different from those of children. Adults need to know the “why” behind the exploration and education experience. They need to know the learning goals and objectives. Most adult learners prefer to explore the subjects and concepts alone and in their own space before engaging in group learning. They also benefit from connecting past experiences and personal expertise to the new topic so they can retain and own the new concepts. Creating opportunities to practice and repeatedly applying these concepts helps develop new habits. After understanding the learning objectives and type of learners to accommodate, lesson plans can be developed to break concepts into manageable segments for application.

Finally, explore your opportunities for delivering education where and when your family can best receive it. When designing this section of the learning, explore pacing between learning segments and creating platforms that allow for individual reading and exploration. Also, consider what could be provided remotely, and which concepts need to be delivered through live in-person learning. Most families like to map out this process in one-, three- and five-year increments depending upon the ages and stages of learners.

## Conclusion

We believe every family has unique characteristics but common pain points that can be reduced or eliminated through education and system support. We encourage the inclusion of all generations in the family system’s education process as soon as possible. We discuss with our clients what each family member is ready to receive and what each business needs. The articulation of appropriate business requirements and clear ownership developmental goals is a critical first step with each client. Determining why and how to bring in the next generation into the education process is best accomplished in a collaborative discussion. Regardless of age or stage of career development, individuals who are the subject of an education must agree to participate for the process to be successful.

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1 “Brené Brown Asked Senior Leaders This Tough Question” Inc., March 28, 2019

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## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Laws Whiskey House
- Navigating the Path: Exploring a Career in Your Family's Business
- Ownership 101: Preserving Your Family's Legacy Through Education

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