



# How to successfully succeed in family businesses

An Interview with Philip Mackeown, Family Talent Coach and Founder of the Family Business Network (FBN) Ireland

by Alexandra Jequier

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Philip Mackeown is a fifth-generation member of the Musgrave family who together with current and former employees own Ireland's largest family company. Philip is a published author, an independent coach and mentor to family business and family office successors and an advocate for the development of family talent. He worked in his family business as an executive, non-executive Family Director and as Head of the Family Council.

In 2012, Philip founded, set-up and managed the Irish chapter of the Family Business Network (FBN) for the support of families-in-business in Ireland. He is the author of the recently published 'The Successor's Voice: Leadership lessons learned as a successor to a family-in-business'. The book draws on his experience, observation of other successors and research. It is written for successors as a resource for them to effectively manage their own careers and contribution inside, alongside, or outside of the business their family owns.

Philip holds a B.A from Trinity College, Dublin, an MBA and is a qualified Executive and Leadership coach. Philip is a native English speaker and is fluent in Spanish.

## Can you please tell us about your family and your family's business?

Our family now owns a professionally managed business, headquartered in Cork, Ireland. The Musgrave Group trades in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and in the south-east of Spain. We are wholesalers to independent food-retailers (many who are family owned), own and operate our own supermarkets and supply and support – with our foodservice business – those preparing and selling food. With a staff of 41,000 we are Ireland's largest private sector employer. Total company sales for 2021 were EUR 4.5 bn.



Founded in 1876, we are in our fifth generation of ownership and intend to remain as a private company. Our company is majority owned by the family with the balance owned by current and past employees. Our unitary board is made up of executives, non-family non-executives and three family directors, and is chaired by a non-family member.

Our family now numbers over 180 people, who live all over the world. We are as close as geography and time allow, work together to continue family ownership, and come together to learn and govern when we can.

### **How did your journey at your family's business begin?**

I joined the company soon after university, worked for ten years in retail and wholesale operations (in Ireland and Spain) before leaving to undertake a master's degree and work outside of the family business. Five years later, I joined the board as a family director and worked for two five-year terms. I participated on our Family Council for over ten years, where I led the preparation of our next generation of successors and contributed to the drafting of our first family constitution.

In 2015 I stood down from the board to manage the Irish chapter of the Family Business Network (FBN), which I founded in 2012.

### **Since you worked in your own family business, but also outside of it, readers of your book will get a great insight in the particularity of successions within families-in-business. What was your principal reason for writing it?**

I wrote this book for successors to families-in-business – for those family members who follow on from their predecessors. Those at any age and stage. My intent in doing this, is to fill the gap in the knowledge and practical advice for successful succession *for and from the point of view of the individual successor*. The aim of this book is to explore and address the question: "What should they know of succession, who only succession know?". I write for a contemporary successor, one who is both educated and committed to their professional growth while mindful of their potential contribution to their family and to their families' business. At its core the book is about the preparation, development, and support of family talent.

This book is intended to be a resource for individual successors who are attempting to identify and ask the 'right' questions and have the courage and perseverance to discover the answers. In looking back at my earned experience over thirty years, this is a book I would have liked to have read. A book to have close-to-hand as I confronted the inevitable opportunities and challenges that came with ownership.

### **These opportunities and challenges are certainly something every successor of families-in-business must cope with. Some are rather successful in doing so, some are not. You are tracing this back to six different leadership profiles one might fit into. Can you tell us more about them?**

Drawing on my experience of those roles required to lead a family enterprise, in the book I have identified and elaborated on six role profiles that may be undertaken by successors, over the course of a life. A successor may occupy more than one role profile at a time and may pass through a number of role profile combinations over a lifetime. Over time I have 'occupied' each of the role profiles which are summarised below:



1. **Uninvolved Successor:** Individual who is not involved in either the family company or family activities, who may be at some distance – either emotionally or geographically – from the company and/or the majority of the family.
2. **Career Successors:** Individual who is either *considering or currently developing a management career in the family company* or is in a position of leadership in the business
3. **Entrepreneur Successor:** Individual who is either *considering or currently developing a career as a commercial or social entrepreneur* either independent of or alongside the core family company.
4. **Transition Successor:** Individual family business successors considering or working *through a change in career direction* or personal fulfilment each which require a fundamental adjustment in the successors' relationship with the family business.
5. **Unifier Successor:** Individual who is either considering or currently developing a *position of leadership within the family* as a family council member or Head, chair of a sub-committee, or as Family Office leaders.
6. **Ownership Successor:** Individual who is either considering or currently developing a *position of leadership as non-executive governor* of the family business or family office and/or is an owner and beneficiary of family assets.

**Besides these leadership role profiles, you have identified key competencies from your experience that successors should have to be a great "family business professional". Can you tell us more about them and how they help succeeding in these roles?**

In my book I identify a number of successor competencies: as family member, manager, entrepreneur or as owner. Of course, many of these are well known and some also apply to those individuals not working in a family business.

When I am talking to successors, my children, their cousins, or those from a different family, I always look out for three things which I believe are (and will be) of particular importance to them as family business professionals.

*First* a demonstrated family awareness. Those skills of observation, active listening, and contribution within and for the family. Those skills that underlie the unifier role identified above. This is often hidden work, motivated by a genuine interest in those people to whom you are related. The benefits of this behaviour within a family are not hard to imagine: a strengthening of the family glue, an ability to bring-in those family members who may feel a bit on the outside or a keen eye for – and encouragement of – those relatives who wish to contribute over time. I spotted these people early when our family came together for the first time.

A *second* competency that I look for is an ability to 'see' the whole piece, a holistic view to take in family, the business and ownership. To 'see systems' as it were. An ability to understand, manage (one's relationship with) and engage with each part which makes up what we know as being of and within 'family business'. This is a competency that takes time to develop and (again) a generosity to accept the (at times conflicting) demands of the family, the business and those of ownership.



Finally, an ability to craft and deliver a credible (and consistent) story of why you are there (as a successor), where you wish to get to and how. Career narration as the ability to write (and communicate) your own script as to a logical progression of your aspirations and career all within the ambit of ownership. To be clear on why you are there, how you will contribute and effective in communicating these, is a skill which will pay dividends many times over.

### **According to your book, getting support is also something that pays dividends many times over. Why is it so important?**

As part of the book, I introduce the family talent principle that successors must design and put in place their own support for optimum performance and contribution. Some elements – a development plan, training, feedback, and a succession of roles – (should) originate within the business. If in place, a good start. If not, start there. However, it is that support which is external to the business which is vital to smooth performance and contribution over time.

### **Where can this external support be found?**

Three come particularly to mind. First are formal courses for development and learning; a particular follow-on benefit are those life-long relationships formed with peers met on such courses.

Second, and in close association with this, is the opportunity afforded by family membership of networks (or similar organisations) for families-in-business such as FBN. Access to peers in a confidential setting has infinite support potential for the engaged successor. As the founder of the FBN chapter in Ireland I saw at first hand the potential and results of peer networking.

However, a more personal support resource is desirable and at times required. For this look to mentors – those who hold a mirror to us as we move forwards with our lives and roles – and coaches – those who will teach, show, organise and motivate use to change behaviours. These (usually) come from one of two sources: members of professional organisations offering such services to families-in-business or individuals found by (or known to) the individual successor.

Successors would do well to push for each of these supports, if not already in place. An 'external' mirror provided by course peers, other families and qualified individuals will allow three things. First, external validation and (self) comparison. Second, the receipt of un-varnished feedback and comment one will never receive from ones' family (or from the managers with whom you work). And finally, a valued other who holds you in unconditional positive regard and will talk you 'off-the-ledge' should you need it. And at some time, over the course of a career, you will.

### **In case external support is in place and functioning – what else can family owners do to smooth and optimise successor performance over time?**

The most effective way for families to do this is the set-up and resourcing of a family talent committee or task force. Support provided by the owners (the family) for the cultivation and development of family talent being separate to the 'business' (and therefore external to it), put in place by the family (successors) and mindful of the current and future family talent needs.



A body mandated as either a sub-committee of the ownership board or of the Family Council with the authority to govern family talent, draw on relevant 'in-company' expertise and that expertise external to the family and to the business if needed. A triumvirate of management, owners, and experts.

Aims may (and will) vary but should encompass an expectation as to the preparation of the family as owners, identification of the current and future leadership needs of the family, oversight of the individuals to fill these roles and the monitoring of individual performance, feedback, wellbeing, and suitability. If such a body is not in place, who has the responsibility to oversee and manage family talent?

**Philip, thank you very much for sharing those insights!**

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