

# Who Inherits the Future

*How a family business separated succession from entitlement and loyalty*

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## SECTOR

Consumer products

## ORGANISATION

Second-generation family-owned company with national distribution

## PARTICIPANTS

Founder, two adult children and four non-family executives

## BUSINESS PRIORITY

Prepare for leadership succession over the next three years

## CARDS USED

The Heir, The Usurper, The Patron and The Phantom

## OUTCOME

The group separated ownership, executive authority and family legacy, creating a clearer basis for the succession process

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## 01 Business context

The founder had led the company for more than thirty years. He planned to step back from daily management within three years while remaining chair of the board.

Both of his adult children worked in the business. His son led commercial operations, and his daughter led product and brand. A long-serving chief operating officer was also considered capable of becoming chief executive.

Succession appeared regularly on the board agenda and produced little progress. Family members spoke about continuity and responsibility. Non-family executives spoke more cautiously about capability, authority and retention. Several senior leaders were unsure how their own roles might change.

The group used Mirror Deck to identify the roles already shaping the succession conversation.

## 02 How Mirror Deck was used

Four cards were placed at the centre of the table: The Heir, The Usurper, The Patron and The Phantom.

Participants wrote their responses privately before speaking. For each card, they considered where the role appeared, what it protected, who depended on it and what the organisation would need if the role changed.

The discussion began with the roles rather than with preferred candidates. This allowed the group to examine assumptions before moving to names and appointments.

### 03 The Heir

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The Heir carried the strongest immediate association. Several participants connected it with the founder's son because he had spent the longest time in the company and led its largest function.

The son described the weight attached to that expectation. Customers, relatives and employees often spoke to him as the future head of the business. The assumption gave him standing and narrowed his freedom to consider whether the role suited him.

His sister described a different effect. Her contribution was regularly praised, while succession conversations returned to seniority, surname and visibility in the commercial network.

The group agreed that inheritance of ownership and appointment to executive leadership required separate discussions and separate criteria.

That distinction also gave non-family executives a clearer basis for discussing leadership continuity and their own future within the company.

### 04 The Usurper and The Patron

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The chief operating officer selected The Usurper. He had never attempted to displace the family. Yet the possibility of a non-family chief executive could easily be interpreted as taking a position that belonged to someone else.

Naming the role clarified a risk in the process. A strong external or non-family candidate could be treated as a threat before their capability had been assessed.

The founder chose The Patron. He had created opportunities for both children and several long-serving executives. His support remained influential in appointments, resources and access to the board.

The group examined how patronage had supported the company's growth and how it could complicate succession. An endorsement from the founder carried more weight than a formal process. A reserved response could weaken a candidate before any decision was made.

### 05 The Phantom

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The daughter added The Phantom to represent the founder's late brother, who had helped build the company during its first decade.

His name appeared whenever the family discussed values, risk or what the founders would have wanted. Different people used his memory to support different positions.

The card helped the group distinguish between a valuable legacy and an absent authority. The company's history could inform the criteria for succession. It could no longer decide on behalf of the present leadership team.

## 06 Actions agreed

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The group created three separate workstreams.

The board would define the future chief executive role and the capabilities required. The family would agree how ownership, dividends and board representation would operate after the founder stepped back. The executive team would develop continuity plans for other senior roles affected by the transition.

All internal and external candidates would be assessed against the same published criteria. The founder would contribute to the process through the board and would record his assessment through the agreed method.

## 07 What the session achieved

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The session gave the group language for the loyalties and fears surrounding succession. It also protected each participant from becoming identical to a card. A person could carry the expectation of The Heir in one conversation and experience The Usurper in another.

Mirror Deck helped the company separate family history from executive selection. The result was a process that respected ownership, recognised legacy and created room for a credible leadership decision.

Succession became a question the organisation could examine directly:

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*“What should pass to the next generation, and what must be earned for the future?”*