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BREAKING THE SUCCESSOR'S CURSE: FREE YOURSELF FROM THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS.

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(http://andrewkeyt.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SuccessorsCurse2_wordpress.jpg) In my last post, we talked

about the [Successor's Curse](https://andrewkeyt.com/understanding-the-successors-curse/)—what it is, why it happens, and the pitfalls that often come along with it. While it is a common experience of leaders in the next generation, there are ways in which you can carve your own path and create your own legacy. Here's how.

*“RESPECT THE PAST, BUT
ALWAYS DO WHAT'S
RIGHT FOR THE FUTURE.”
—BILL WRIGLEY, JR.*

Yes, inherited traits and learned traits run deep, but I promise, it is possible to counteract the effects of the Successor's Curse. That's not to say it is easy, and most often it starts with what psychologist Murray Bowen called “differentiation.”

Bowen describes differentiation as “the process of freeing yourself from your family's processes to define yourself. This means being able to have different opinions and values than your family members but being able to stay emotionally connected to them. It means being able to calmly reflect on a conflicted interaction afterward, realizing your own role in it, and then choosing a different response for the future.”

Differentiation leads to the ability to think more independently, and to create a greater sense of self-awareness and self-confidence. All of these together lead to stronger leaders. If a successor fails to differentiate, the family business most often fails to move its legacy forward. A differentiated leader, on the other hand, is able to cast a vision that others can rally around simply because it is a vision she can take charge of.

My research with, and training of successors for 25 years, has shown me—the successors, and their doubters—that there is hope in breaking the Successor's Curse, and creating a new legacy. Here's how the successful ones forged their own path:

1. Get clarity about mission, vision, and values—in business and in personal life.

With understanding comes clarity. Ask yourself:

- What are my personal values?
- What am I good at?
- What am I passionate about?
- What do I want for my life and my career?
- How are my skillsets the same or different than those of my parents?
- What does the family enterprise need from me? Am I prepared to provide that?
- Do my personal values align with the family business?

When a successor is passionate about what needs to be done, and why, they are more able to carve a path that works for them, as well as the business. This clarity of mission, vision and values is another way successors can overcome the resistance that they are likely to face along the way. And if they're smart, they'll create unity around their vision to let their people be the heroes of the success stories.

2. Establish your credibility—both internally and externally.

Earning your way to the top does not start with climbing. It begins with digging down to reality, to the bedrock of one's true identity, and continues by building a sense of belief in oneself (i.e., internal credibility). Of course education is important. Equally as important is getting the experiences—successes and failures—you need to feel that you can do the job of leading the family business in your own way.

To lead with credibility, successors take the risk to lead as only they can lead. They must develop core convictions and form their own values and vision for their life, all while honestly assessing if they possess what the business needs going forward.

When you build a track record of success, listen to others, and demonstrate willingness to do hard work, you'll also win the respect of others (i.e., external credibility). And it won't have anything to do with your parents. This is what Christie Hefner called "being true to [one's] self"—and this is how the successor begins the ascent to the top.

3. De-mystify your parents.

In a family business, we grow up in a world where stories are being told about the mythical feats of our parents (and sometimes grandparents, and great-grandparents). If you always see your parents as perfect, and you don't see that they have also struggled, stumbled and fallen, these stories of success can seem magical. When a parent allows a child to only idealize their successes, and simultaneously shelters them from failure, conflict and the hard-knocks of life, it's a problem.

Identifying the most powerful stories about your parents—their successes and failures—enables you to develop compassion for yourself as a leader. With that comes the realization that you too, will have failures; you too, will stumble and fall, but at the end of the day, if you persist—you can succeed.

While many young leaders focus their actions on making their parents happy, the most successful successors do things differently. They work on building their vision of what is right for the future, even if it brings disapproval from their parents. In the process of becoming a differentiated adult, successors must see their parents as more than just a hero. They need to see the parent as human.

BREAK FREE FROM THE SUCCESSOR'S CURSE.

At the age of 28, Bill Wrigley, Jr., former CEO of the iconic family-run William Wrigley Co., was the assistant to the President, his father, Bill Wrigley, Sr. Bill Sr. had a reputation of being on top of every little detail, and his job was his life. Early on, Bill Jr. started to feeling the pressure of his father's legacy. He was trying to lead the way that his father had led, involved in everything. The demanding schedule and emotional pressure of trying to replicate his fathers' successes bore down on him until he started feeling ill and had to withdraw from meetings. He started thinking that he wouldn't make it to 40 if he continued to try to lead in the way that his father did.

Bill came to a critical juncture where he was forced to ask himself a simple question, "What is important to me?" "After I stopped answering that question only based on what my family thought was important for me, I finally got honest with myself," he told me.

He developed a personal strategic plan to guide him in his life and work: to break free of his father's influence, find out who he was, as well as what he wanted, and to push the Wrigley Company to reinvent itself. Bill took the time out of his schedule to do a planning retreat, where he asked himself:

- What are my values?
- Where do I want to be in 10 years?
- Where do I want the company to be in five years?
- How do I want to be different than my father?

All of these questions led him to a vision that was true to him, and allowed the family legacy to prosper. He revisited this strategic plan and process often, and over time, it became clear to Bill that for the company to survive and the family legacy to continue, he needed to take the company private. This led to him finding a capital partner with a long-term vision, the Mars family. The company was sold to the Mars Family in 2008, but the legacy lives on.

LEAD AUTHENTICALLY.

Unintentionally, successors fail to lead authentically because they fail to differentiate. It is all too easy to assume the larger identity of legendary parents and to allow that to prop up the leader's sense of self. But it's only a crutch. Successors can't build a foundation of credibility on someone else's accomplishments. The foundation of authenticity can only be built from the hard work of establishing a true sense of one's self and one's own accomplishments.

Overcoming the successor's curse is not an easy task, but if a successor can develop a sense of self-confidence, values, and a vision forward, he or she can step out of the shadows and start leading in a way that is authentic to them. Bill Wrigley, Jr. captured this idea by saying, "Respect the past, but always do what's right for the future."

For more stories of some of the most well-known successors navigating their role as a leader in the business and in the family, please check out "[Myths and Mortals: Family Business Leadership and Succession Planning](https://www.amazon.com/Myths-Mortals-Business-Leadership-Succession/) (<https://www.amazon.com/Myths-Mortals-Business-Leadership-Succession/>)."

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