

Family-owned businesses

A human story

PART 4 | WELCOME TO THE FAMILY



Amrop

Leaders For What's Next



Foreword

By Željko Šundov
Partner, Amrop Croatia

Hiring new leaders to take up the reins is one of the most critical moments in the lifecycle of a family-owned business. It is also one of the most sensitive.

As an incoming executive you'll need to address a host of key questions. How does the owner truly envision your role? What is the scope of your mandate? Just two of the many things you'll want to understand; ideally before stepping through the door.

Any new leader should perform head-to-tail diligence on a prospective employer: from its governance to its assets. In the case of an FOB, the questions run deeper still. What are its deeply-held values, its unique strengths? Who are the talented people, the safe hands?

The stakes are high, and open conversations with the owners are essential before you decide to make the move. What do they want to change? How much movement will they accept? What must be preserved at all costs?

Particularly as a CEO, the urge to galvanize and transform is natural. But in an FOB, this can be perceived as reckless. After all, the firm has developed over time, discerning the optimal way of working and securing success. The new leader's task is to seek evolution over revolution, gradually introducing any necessary shifts. All whilst maintaining the core strengths and values. Communicating with purpose and clarity.

An FOB's owners have built a reputation over years and created strong bonds with internal stakeholders. As their 'successor', the buy-in of your team and wider employees is vital.

It means taking the time to get to know them as people rather than human capital, via two-way communications rather than one-way transmission. These attitudes and actions build trust and secure sustainable performance

In a nutshell, arriving in the cockpit of an FOB is an endeavor that is as unusual as it is worthwhile. It takes careful preparation, honest dialogues with the owners before accepting the role. Reflecting upfront on how you'll present yourself, identifying the key people and then forging authentic relationships.

Our article exploring the culture of family-owned businesses surfaced a number of distinctive characteristics. One is 'deep determination' — profound debate, reflection and testing, risk management. Another is the 'two-way mirror' — a long term perspective from a firm that has weathered many storms.

What does all of this mean for you?

A family-business, like any other, expects results (after all, it has been built on entrepreneurship). However, its owners will likely give you a little more time to set its course and strategy.

All the more, if you have invested effort in selling your proposals to the people who established its legacy and will support you in assuring its future.

Željko Šundov



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Family-owned businesses

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

In 'Welcome to the Family', Amrop provides guidance for executives in their first few months in a family-owned business: the attitudes, behaviors and actions that will equip them for success in this special context — and why they are so necessary.

In this article we unpack the 4 critical stages in the joining process, and present 5 keys to driving strategic success in an FOB.



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Family-owned businesses

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

This series is based on conversations with senior Amrop Partners around the world. Professionals who have cultivated deep and trusting relationships with owners and successors.



UNDER THE SKIN

Academic and business publications exploring the FOB arena reveal a palette of common factors: from the emotional complexities of succession planning to indistinct boundaries between family and business. Amrop seeks to provide wider and deeper insights: how key factors play out in the leadership domain and what to do about them.

SCOPING THE TERRAIN

Our investigation concerns growing and globalizing mid-sized FOBs (with a turnover in developed markets of minimum \$1-10 billion, and in emerging markets of \$250 million to \$2 billion). Founders or descendants hold significant share capital and/or voting rights.

A 5-PART SERIES

In Part 1 of our series we explored the lifecycle of the FOB. In Part 2, we uncovered distinctive cultural facets and in Part 3, we entered the world of executive search. Here in Part 4 we progress to advice for leaders joining FOBs. We conclude in Part 5 with a blueprint for family-owned businesses to bring out the best in their governance and talent advisors.



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Comment

Cristina Postolache
Partner | Amrop Romania



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Many CEE family-owned businesses are still led or heavily influenced by their founders, built through resilience, intuition, and long-term vision. For incoming executives, the key is strategic sensitivity — knowing when to lead and when to adapt. Onboarding often happens more informally, through conversations and trust-building moments.

In this context, versatility is essential: blending structured thinking with personal warmth, driving change while preserving identity. Success belongs to those who navigate legacy with respect and prepare the ground for evolution—leaders who understand their role is not to overwrite the past, but to co-author the next chapter alongside the family.”



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Joining an FOB | 4 critical stages for incoming executives

1

Preparing entry



Ask for **insights** on the top management team: configuration, decision-making processes and your (real) mandate behind the topline job description.

Get clarity on the **integration plan**: milestones, stakeholders, governance & chief custodian.

Seek **transition coaching** to enhance your awareness of your behavior patterns & their outcomes.

Be more '**dispassionate naturalist**' than 'slash and burn'. Examine which areas can potentially be cultivated, re-positioned, re-shaped or integrated to support the environment.

2

Building relationships



Blend functional knowhow with emotional maturity, emphasizing **collaboration over competition**. Build bridges, play a positive & supportive role.

In gaining insights on the factors that make the FOB tick, use **constructive questioning**, not relentless interrogation.

Asking, active listening and dialogue nourish the visibly important relationships & reveal the more **subtle networks**.

If you understand which topics fall within your mandate, the owner will be more likely give you **autonomy**.

3

Setting the strategic road map



Leadership agility makes it possible for you to resolve the core paradox of continuity & change.

Despite the long-term culture of an FOB, you'll be **expected to deliver** just as in any other organization.

Secure *continuity* with the **4 leadership styles** of patience, collaboration, diplomacy & humility. Assure *change* with the 4 styles of transformation, entrepreneurialism, agility & focus.

If you're leveraging your experience from a listed multinational, **avoid 'when-we' language**. Diplomatically adjust your know-how to the new.

4

Selling the strategy



Reassure the family about what will **not change**, showing humility & understanding of the firm's strengths.

Resist the '**new broom**' syndrome — families are very alert to 'change for the sake of change' that could destroy the legacy.

Use **positive language**: pressure and enthusiasm can cause lapses into 'have-to' speak. Help the family to not only understand the benefit but to feel it.

Put **relationships first, data second**. But if trust may trump technicity, the basic principles still apply. Be armed with documented examples.



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Comment

Marko Mlakar
Managing Partner | Amrop Adria



Family businesses don't run on organization charts — they run on legacy, loyalties, and often invisible lines of power. 'Welcome to the Family' shatters any illusion that standard onboarding will suffice. Charge in like a corporate cowboy, and you won't last past the next board meeting.

This guide gets it right: success isn't about control — it's about credibility. If you can't read the room, earn trust, and respect the unwritten rules, you're not leading — you're visiting. The smartest executives don't just navigate complexity — they decode it, quietly building influence where others misstep."



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Welcome to the family



If you put into a family business the best person in the market who shoots the lights out for private equity you could come off the rails.”

Amrop Partner

Cofra, the family owner of the retail multinational C&A, began life in 1841 as a clothing warehouse set up by two brothers. Today it is eyeing new horizons: sustainable food and clean energy. The Financial Times recently reported that Cofra's Brenninkmeijer family have “evolved a particular way of conserving family control and managing succession based on a blend of family and professional management.”¹ Family members now see joining the business as a choice rather than an obligation. The current CEO, Boudewijn Beerkens, (whose mother was a Brenninkmeijer) has been in post since 2019. But he did not begin his career in the firm. Instead, he was a Partner at PwC, the CFO of WK NV and then CFO of Dutch conglomerate SHV until 2016, when he joined the family group as Chief Strategy and Operations Officer.

This family business clearly values outsiders. How could life look for an executive entering an FOB? One Amrop Partner relates a meeting in the grand dining room of one of the foremost families in the country. Its walls were lined with the portraits of venerable ancestors, peering down on the people assembled there. It was as if they were challenging them to safeguard the legacy, he said. *Don't mess up.*

Any journey has its critical development stages. In our exploration of the FOB lifecycle² Amrop tracked the forks in the road for the FOB: from foundation to succession, changes in finance and ownership, fundamental transformations and shifts in governance. Finally, with listed status and growth, standardization may come: the distinction between FOBs and other businesses begins to blur. Still, unique factors will likely linger. As a new executive in an FOB, we invite you to identify the chapter your firm is currently in, and foresee what's next.

Let's begin with a recap of the force that governs the attitudes and behavior of the business — its culture.

7 cultural facets of FOBs

As discussed in our previous article,³ FOBs have distinctive and deeply held characteristics, rooted in their founder's DNA. These pass to subsequent generations and later incarnations of the business: from ownership shifts, the family office, to global growth and listing. Whilst each firm is culturally unique, our interviews revealed seven over-arching facets of 'the way we do things around here.'

1. *Deep Determination*: space is given to debating, reflection, planning and testing. Conservative risk management and investment are exercised.
2. *Tight-knit Discretion*: executives must maintain a low public profile. Admission to an FOB requires the endorsement of trusted advisors, relationships are then deep and enduring.
3. *To the Point*: organizational structures are relatively straightforward — the family ultimately decides.
4. *Two-way Mirror*: a long-term view on value creation. *Entrepreneurial DNA*: solution-focus, collaboration and pragmatism. The 'owner-attitude' is appreciated, and work-life boundaries blurred.

5. *Stable Homogeneity*: solid engineering and a longstanding purpose with a preference for like-minded people, evolution over revolution.
6. *Expectant Caring*: a passion for the business and its loyal stakeholders, with generosity both expected and given, and an above-average failure tolerance.

The versatile leader

The fit with your new home vitally depends upon your leadership style. Amrop's examination of executive hiring in the FOB⁴ revealed 8 indicators for top candidates. You are *patient, collaborative, diplomatic* and *humble* on the one hand. *Transformative, entrepreneurial, agile* and *focused* on the other.

Applying this spectrum of styles matters, because as an FOB executive you'll face a two-headed leadership paradox: the need to assure *continuity* and *change*. Consider the dynamics (and understandable sensitivities) at play: the owners are building on a hard-earned legacy. The firm must evolve whilst preserving the bases. Fortunately, it is perfectly feasible to rise from 'or-or' to 'and-and' thinking. Resolving a paradox enables FOB leaders to get the best of both worlds in innovative ways. Furthermore, our 8 indicators counterbalance each other. A leader can be '*collaboratively focused*'. Or '*patiently transformative*'. As the authors of a compelling work on leadership agility⁵ argue, effective leadership is not a straightjacket. Rather, it is about "understanding your current way of building relationships and influencing people, then stretching yourself to include neighbouring styles, just outside of your current comfort zone."

But there is more. Depending on the FOB's lifecycle phase, it may be pushed and pulled by other tensions such as *family versus business*. It must accommodate the demands of growing numbers of relations (founder, children, cousins) as well as those of an increasingly complex business.



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An interplay of light and shadow

There is yet another reason for versatility. The 'Core Quadrant'⁶ proposes that we all possess innate qualities. Each, when taken to its extreme, becomes a pitfall. In an FOB, 'entrepreneurialism' is a prime example. "You have to find somebody who isn't aggressively ambitious," says this Amrop Partner. "Who's highly talented and skilled but capable of fitting in." With practice, a growth mindset and coaching, an executive will naturally learn to combine leadership styles and tread the middle path. But first impressions do count. Given the importance of swiftly establishing credibility and trust in an FOB, you are advised to acquire a certain virtuosity before joining. As seen⁷ a good executive search consultant will be discretely spotting signals in a candidate's attitudes and behavior throughout the hiring process. One Amrop Partner recalls a candidate from a large corporate who failed to grasp the nuances of the FOB role on offer: *"I'm now the Regional CFO of Asia Pacific, multiple countries. I'm this big guy."* Meanwhile the hiring firm was an independent local listed company. "This CFO role was much richer and wider." A candidate will fall off the radar if ego or status blinds them to such value.

1 Preparing entry

A global Amrop study⁸ asked senior executives about their due diligence on hiring organizations. Most consulted multiple channels, both within an organization's control, (such as websites), and outside it, (such as the opinions of employees). Only a third sought data and facts direct from the organization.

Given the 'tight-knit discretion' of an FOB (whose name you may not be told until your first meeting with them), insights may be elusive. Yet certain knowledge is essential. And this goes beyond standard interrogations (performance, market position, history). As family members will likely hold top management roles, it is vital to understand the configuration of the leadership team and your place in it. Or, rather, its configurations; an FOB may have several boards or committees on which multiple family members sit. Ask your executive search consultant for an organizational map. Seek answers on how strategic decisions are taken and your (real) mandate and involvement — beyond the job description.

A hiring decision may also be undermined by 'founders syndrome'. This describes an owner's unwillingness to share or cede control. It may only become clear after the employment contract is signed. Amrop Partners also report instances of sloppy onboarding or transition processes. One senior hire simply dissolved into the fabric of the firm. Clarity on the integration plan is therefore vital — its milestones, stakeholders, governance, and chief custodian. Of course, onboarding can be suboptimal in all kinds of organizations. But given the particular dynamics in many family businesses, it needs particular rigour. In the same vein, and to check true commitment, it is advisable to ask what factors led to the decision for an external hiring process. The answer will enable you to assess the underlying motivation for the search.

Any new executive is advised to seek transition coaching. "Technical ability alone is frequently insufficient for a successful adaptation," say the authors of an Amrop article.⁹ A coach helps you to become aware of habitual behavior patterns and their outcomes, proposes interventions and new interpretations of challenges.

Balance is key

As a newcomer you must now navigate an unfamiliar ecosystem, one which may feel impenetrable. The attitude should be less 'slash-and-burn' and more 'dispassionate naturalist.' As this Amrop Partner says: "If you put into a family business the best person in the market who shoots the lights out for private equity you could come off the rails because they're going to challenge the owners to take on risk and debt. And family businesses don't like that." Instead it is important to understand the terrain, identifying areas that can be cultivated, re-shaped, repositioned, or integrated in ways that support the environment.

2 Building relationships

An exploration of boardroom functionality points out that a daughter or son may get a senior role in a family business at an age when they would (at best) hold a middle management position elsewhere.¹⁰ Executives need to be alert to both the advantages and disadvantages of this.

At the outset of the 2000's, Jean-Claude Decaux, founder of what is now the world's biggest outdoor advertising multinational, took a big decision. He handed the reins to his three sons. Today aged 48, Jean Sebastien Decaux set out in 1998 with JCDecaux in the UK, rising to become a member of the management board as early as 2013. In 2019, it was announced that he would leave his operational function to devote himself to the family's philanthropic activities. The group currently runs a co-CEO model, with two other family members, Jean Charles and Jean-Francois Decaux, holding the roles.





Comment

Matej Mrak
Partner | Amrop Slovenia



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Joining a family-owned business as an executive from the corporate world demands more than experience — it requires emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity. Your structured thinking, strategic planning, and political navigation skills are assets, but they must be applied with humility and common sense.

Unlike corporations, family businesses often operate with a single decision-maker and a deeply personal vision. Success hinges on four critical stages: preparing your entry by understanding the owner's mindset; building trust through relationships and active listening; setting a strategic roadmap that respects legacy while enabling growth; and selling the strategy by reassuring on continuity and aligning with family values. Remember, their success wasn't accidental—it was built on grit, instinct, and resilience. Your role is not to reinvent, but to enhance. Learn their culture, understand their needs, and execute with clarity and respect.



Conversely, an owner suffering from founder's syndrome may have little confidence in his child or be so convinced of his own superiority that he gives the successor no room to perform.

Pedro Ferrer, Deputy Chairman and co-CEO of Freixenet, the global leader in sparkling wines, is a positive example of a family member who literally grew up with the product. "As a small boy I played by the cavas, which are a part of my life, and I always had the idea that that was where my future lay."¹¹ After studies in economics, ecology and viticulture he started work at the Freixenet Group from the ground up, first as a production assistant and then in sales. After a further eight years' studying in Spain and California he moved to a senior role in Freixenet's USA office and was appointed CEO in 1998.

Sensitivities may nonetheless run high. And as seen, multiple family members may hold key roles. As a non-family incomer, it is vital to avoid undermining their confidence, both in themselves and in you. One Amrop Partner warns: "Never show off. Never." Of course, demonstrable functional knowhow is vital. But so is emotional maturity. Family members "never want to see someone competing with them at the power game level." Another reflects, "They're insecure. They're brought up in the internal ranks. They haven't necessarily been out and measured against others." Collaboration is more important than competition, says this Amrop Partner. Despite heated discussions in private, "Family businesses are mostly not conflict oriented. If you tip up the apple cart, you become difficult."

So much for what the non-family executive shouldn't do. What should you do? "We want people who say, *you're both right*. These are bridges, problem solvers," says this Amrop Partner. "They can find a way to work with different people and cultures." Says another, "You have to understand, appreciate and play a positive role, rather than continually judging them or criticizing what is not going well." You must therefore seek to reassure in the first instance. A new CEO will need particular patience when the veteran founder is still on the premises.

Leading with questions

The information-gathering stage is vital in the life of any new executive: gaining insight into the factors that make the firm and its people tick. Those that will block the mechanism or send it purring into a bright future. In an FOB, given the value of legacy, it is even more critical not only to gain insights but to be seen to do it in the right way. This means constructive questioning, not relentless interrogation. Sincere curiosity signals respect for family know-how. It provides fertile ground for mutual collaboration — asking, active listening and dialogue nourish the visibly important relationships. But it also reveals the invisible mycelium of the family forest — subtle networks that are equally critical. "FOBs have very detailed technology or knowledge and relationships," says this Amrop Partner. "Often the founders or the second generation understand the obscure corners of the business, what works, what doesn't, and they have the relationships with the customers and the suppliers."

Drawing the heatmap

So, the ideal non-family executive is a team player who is "one step ahead and understands which topics he or she will be allowed to manage," says this Amrop Partner. This will encourage a careful owner to give you autonomy. Another has a poignant example: "The founder would take care of a machine that he broke his back to save up for. And it has been running 25 years, still working like new." He advises against summoning the dumpster truck. "You'll love an executive who loves the machine like you do." This Amrop Partner relates a case in point: "There were areas in which the company was very strong — manufacturing, supply chain procurement. On these, the person needs to learn what is working well and what not to destroy." The question of delineating the strategic boundaries takes us to the terrain of designing — and selling — the strategy.



Setting the strategic road map

A family-business expects more than big ears and a winning smile. With the zones of continuity and change identified, it is now time to set the strategic road map. Together with the continuity indicators of humility, diplomacy, collaboration and patience, this is where leadership indicators for the 'change' side of the spectrum enter the frame.

"When it comes to business performance and transformation, you need to be on the ball and deliver," says this Amrop Partner. The 4 leadership styles of *transformation*, *entrepreneurialism*, *agility* and *focus* are all essential here. Particularly for the CEO, whose many hats include that of the business leader who drives the business agenda. Especially if the firm is undergoing a transition, executives who foresee a gentle ride may need to think again, she warns. The style of *patience* may be one-sided. "They want more and more, faster and better."

Newcomers who seek to introduce consistency and process may need to draw on best industry practice. If you haven't acquired the skillset in a large corporate, professional development can help. Hiring specialist consultants can be faster. But experience is better still. "The best fit is an executive trained in complex structured organizations," one who can profitably translate structures into operational processes, says this Amrop Partner. But there is a caveat. As we have seen,¹² a purely multinational track record may not instil the nimbleness this ecosystem demands. It may also lead to a 'when-we' attitude. As this Amrop Partner says "You have to deal with the new situation. Not referring to how you faced a similar problem in Procter." This is where *diplomacy* comes into play.



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However, executives can take heart. Let's recall the cultural facet of *'Expectant Caring'* — one that includes a certain failure tolerance. As one Amrop Partner sees it, a metrics-based organization will measure an executive on short-term results (and a mistake could result in a firing). In the FOB, mis-steps are differently managed, partially due to the owner's close involvement in decision-making.



Many CEOs come in saying, 'I know it all. I've been brought in to ship-shape this company.' The assumption is the company is not ship-shaped."

Amrop Partner



Selling the strategy

You have asked the right people the right questions in the right way. Identified the quick wins and the long-term road map. Distinguished the 'nice-to-haves' from the 'must-haves'. Determined which areas of the business should be preserved, and which are ripe for a rethink. You have framed the business case and identified the KPIs. Armed with your presentation, you enter the boardroom. What now?

Several Amrop Partners emphasized that no matter how elegant and well-presented the arguments, the family will ultimately decide. "The owner trumps all." And yet, an executive is expected to make a difference. Here are our 5 recommendations for selling the strategy to meet those ambitions. Let's assume that mutual trust has been established thanks to a constructive relationship building phase. "If you feel this confidence from a person who tries to persuade you of a change you already accept his proposal or his initiative," says an Amrop Partner.

Driving strategy in an FOB | 5 steps to success

- 1. Reassure the family about what will not change.** "You need the humility to understand the company's strengths and not destroy that value," says one Amrop Partner. "Many CEOs come in saying, 'I know it all. I've been brought into ship-shape this company.' The assumption is the company is not ship-shaped."
- 2. Stay clear of the new broom syndrome.** 'Change for the sake of change' will get a skeptical reaction in any organization. But in the FOB a meta-fear may lurk — a change tsunami that will sweep the legacy away: "Maybe tomorrow you'll make the whole organization like this."
- 3. Use positive language** (underpinned by a constructive attitude). An Amrop Partner warns against finger wagging and 'have-to' language. It is all too easy for an executive to slip into this behavior when under the influence of pressure (or enthusiasm). Instead, strategists should only help stakeholders to understand the benefit, but feel it, remembering that this is a smart (and probably wise) audience.
- 4. Put relationships first, data second.** Whilst incompetence is unlikely to lead to a long and illustrious tenure, trust tends to be prioritized over technical prowess. Notwithstanding, the basic business principles still apply. "You need documented examples," says this Amrop Partner.
- 5. Find safety in numbers.** "Some individuals argue and explain why their decision might be better." But defeat must be gracefully conceded, no matter one's convictions. The owner decides. If his or her rejection of a strategy turns out to be misplaced, it is time to pull out the facts, says one Amrop Partner. Concession must not become over-compliance. "I brought you this idea. On x date we went through the numbers and you declined it." What if the owner now backtracks and accepts the new strategy? "Then I had better be as good as I think I am to make it work."



Sources and further reading

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In our article 'The Leadership Advisor' Amrop provides honest advice for family-owned businesses who are considering or undergoing an executive hire.



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