

# Find Your Strategic Voice

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Women have always been major contributors to the sustainability of family enterprises over the generations but have not always been recognized. There have been efforts over the past 30 plus years to acknowledge the female role as influencers in the background, or as “chief emotional officers,” but these behind-the-scenes jobs were not always experienced as creating the opportunity for more direct influence or access to a variety of roles. Over the past decade there have been an increasing number of opportunities for women to directly contribute their skills and capabilities in family enterprises. As opposed to operating from the back of the room in a “quiet whisper,” women feel more able to have a seat at the table and to provide meaningful leadership. However, despite these significant shifts, in many families the playing field isn’t quite level yet. Many women in family enterprises face challenges of lower expectations, fewer role models, limited opportunities for mentoring, and the need to overcome expectations from the past, which don’t always correspond to their increased position.

Below are some suggestions that can allow women to be successful in using their voices to advance their family enterprises:

## Be Strategic

Women should make time to get clear about their vision and goals for their role in their family enterprises. They need to look carefully at the roles and expectations that exist and how that is different from what they would like to see. Developing a strategy to achieve their goals and vision will increase their chances of success. This includes making the time to think ahead when interacting with the family and family companies. Carefully planning conversations so that they can get what they need *and* meet others’ needs is a skill set that will serve them well. Without a strategy, it is all too easy to continue to fulfill existing roles and behaviors in the family out of a sense of belonging and duty. For example, a daughter who has been promoted into a leadership role in the family company, but whose father sees her more as the mom taking care of his grandchildren, might ask her father about how he balanced his role as a business leader with his role as a husband and father. Opening up that conversation may help him reflect on his own choices and be more supportive and aware of the choices she is making.

## Use Your Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Recognize the Family Emotional Intelligence (FQ)

Women are raised to be closely tuned in to the context they are operating in and often have honed their ability to assess their environment. These are skills that can help them take the temperature of the room and serve as leaders in thoughtful conversations and/or decision-making, whether it be a management meeting, a board room, or even a family reunion.

However, it is this sensitivity to what is around them that can inadvertently pull women into more readily taking responsibility for managing family dynamics. One of the big issues for women leaders in family enterprises is learning to balance their own pulls as caretaker while also being strategic in areas that involve the family. This crossover can be hard to navigate, and it is important for women to know their own emotional situation while simultaneously reflecting on their family dynamics. Thinking about the patterns of these dynamics over generations is paramount: What has gotten the family stuck in the past? What has allowed the family to move forward and achieve what they have set out to do? Some might call these capabilities “soft skills,” but the literature on leadership suggests that these skills are essential for success.

## Use Connections

Most would agree that being able to utilize connections and relationships is a key building block for being successful in business. We also know that the ability to build personal connections in families goes a long way. We hear increasing numbers of women say how their connections with other women leaders outside of their family business serve as valuable resources and provide important support. Women benefit from having a network that allows them to share experiences and to work through their strategy ideas in order to plan for how they can successfully operate within their family enterprises. It is the camaraderie of these professional, long-term relationships that has made an enormous difference for many women in family businesses.

Women have always been significant players in family enterprises. By incorporating these strategies, women can increase their ability to use their voices to contribute to their family enterprises in meaningful and rewarding ways.



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