

# Stop Inheriting Chaos—Start Leading with Clarity | Jonathan Goldhill

Guest article by Robert Plank

## The Hidden Cost of Playing It Safe in a Family-Owned Company

I should have been the fourth generation. But the business died before I got the chance.

That loss didn't just alter the course of my career—it gave me a mission: help next-gen leaders avoid the silent breakdowns that destroy family businesses from the inside out.

You're told to protect the legacy. But what if that's the very thing holding you back?

Legacy, if left untouched, becomes inertia. It keeps the wrong people in power, clutters your processes, and confuses your team. If you're stepping into a business that runs on assumptions and loyalty instead of systems and clarity, you're not building a future—you're inheriting someone else's unfinished past.

So here's the truth: if you want to lead, you have to disrupt. And disruption only works when it's done with structure.

## The Sticky Baton

The number one reason succession fails? No process.

I call it sticky baton syndrome. The outgoing founder won't fully let go. The incoming leader doesn't know how to take control without conflict. It creates a power vacuum where no one's truly in charge—and everyone's frustrated.

You've likely felt this.

- You're expected to lead, but have no formal authority.
- The founder still calls the shots but avoids responsibility.
- Roles are undefined. Meetings go nowhere. Decisions stall.

This isn't a personality issue—it's a structural one. The solution isn't to push harder. It's to implement systems that create clarity.

Start by making conversations consistent. Install meeting rhythms that are structured and purposeful. Don't just talk—track. Don't just gather—decide. When you shift the process, you shift the power.

## Tools Before Talk

Here's something that changed everything for me:

If you want people to think differently, don't lecture. Give them a tool that changes how they act.

That's what I do. I don't show up with speeches. I bring simple frameworks that change behavior by making action unavoidable.

Here's what that looks like:

1. **Delegate and Elevate** – Helps each team member identify the tasks they love and the ones draining their energy. It shows who should be doing what—and who shouldn't.
2. **Meeting Rhythms with Real Accountability** – Every meeting should drive a decision, solve a problem, or reinforce priorities. If it doesn't do one of those things, cancel it.
3. **Simple Business Planning** – Not a 90-page binder. A short plan that outlines 5 core goals, who owns them, and how progress is tracked.

When these tools are in place, your business starts to run on systems instead of emotion. People stop reacting and start taking responsibility. The drama fades—and performance rises.

## Purpose Isn't Optional

If I ask you why you're running this business and your answer is "to make money," we're already in trouble.

You could have made money doing anything. Why *this*?

That's the question that unlocks everything. Most people don't have a real answer. They default to something safe. But real leadership starts when you can articulate a deeper reason—something that resonates with your team and drives your decisions.

Purpose isn't fluff. It's fuel.

The best businesses are built on clear, compelling missions:

- Tesla wants to accelerate the transition to sustainable energy.
- Starbucks created the third place between home and work.
- 3M solves everyday problems with practical innovation.

When your purpose is clear, you stop making noise and start making impact. You attract better people. You make faster decisions. You build a business that means something.

## Culture Isn't a Poster

If your company values are words like "integrity" or "excellence," and no one can explain what those mean in practice, you don't have values—you have decoration.

Culture is what actually happens.

It's how people behave when no one's watching. It's who gets promoted and who doesn't. It's what you tolerate when things get messy.

I coach teams to uncover the values they're already living—not the ones they wish they had. We translate those into behaviors that are specific, memorable, and useful.

- "Own it" beats "Accountability"
- "Help first" beats "Teamwork"
- "Say the hard thing" beats "Transparency"

You already have a culture. The only question is whether it's building your business or slowly breaking it.

## Humble, Hungry, and Smart

When I'm helping identify the next true leader of a family business, I don't look at age or years of experience. I look for three qualities:

- **Humble:** Open to feedback. Willing to learn. Not obsessed with being right.

- **Hungry:** Driven to grow the business—not just protect the status quo.
- **People Smart:** Aware of how their actions affect others. Able to lead without creating chaos.

This simple filter, borrowed from Patrick Lencioni’s Ideal Team Player model, tells me more than any résumé ever could.

I also use behavioral assessments to match personality to role. A visionary shouldn’t be managing day-to-day ops. A technician shouldn’t be expected to inspire a team.

Leadership is about fit. And when the right person is in the right role, everything starts working.

## Stop Clinging to Legacy. Start Creating It.

You don’t need to blow up your business to move forward. But you do need to stop protecting it from change.

Preserving the past isn’t the goal. Evolving it is.

Ask yourself:

- What am I tolerating that no longer fits where we’re going?
- What does our team believe—but can’t yet put into words?
- What structure do we need to lead with clarity instead of chaos?

If you’re willing to ask the real questions and commit to building systems that support real leadership, then you’re ready to do more than carry the legacy.

You’re ready to lead it forward.

(And if your team still uses a fax machine, we’ve got bigger problems.)

## About Jonathan Goldhill: Business Growth Coach for Family Businesses

Jonathan Goldhill knows firsthand what happens when a family business has no plan for the next generation—it disappears. As a family business advisor and executive coach with over 30

years of experience, Jonathan helps entrepreneurial leaders avoid that fate by guiding them through growth strategy, succession planning, and leadership development. He's the author of *Disruptive Successor* and host of *The Disruptive Successor Show*. His proven frameworks, including EOS and Scaling Up, help businesses scale while staying aligned. Jonathan specializes in working with next-gen leaders navigating complex family dynamics. Learn more at [TheGoldhillGroup.com](http://TheGoldhillGroup.com).