THE PERSON IN THE PLAN:

What Family Enterprise Advisors Need to Know About the Individual Layer

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THE PREMISE

Many advisors working with ultra-high-net-worth families are well equipped to address the structural and systemic dimensions of transition. Governance structures get designed. Succession plans get written. Leadership roles get defined. Family dynamics get mapped. The work is sophisticated, well-resourced, and earnestly done.

What sometimes gets lost inside all of that is the individual. Structures and systems only work sustainably when the individuals inside them have enough clarity, agency, and differentiation to inhabit them well.

Each individual is a unique person with a sense of who they are, what they need, and where they are going, independent of any title, any enterprise, any family expectation. When that individual layer is unstable or unaddressed, even the best-designed structural solutions become vulnerable. Not because they are poorly built, but because the person who has to inhabit them is not ready to do so.

> *"Groupness relies on individual wholeness."*
>
> MATTHEW WESLEY
> FOUNDER, ASCEND FAMILY ADVISORY

Where It Presents and Why It's Often Overlooked

The individual identity question is not always obvious. It does not announce itself as an identity crisis. It shows up as a governance negotiation that keeps stalling. A leadership transition that never quite lands. A rising generation member who participates in every program but hasn't yet contributed something original. A founder who agreed to step back but keeps re-engaging. A family member who was once vocal and has gone quiet.

These patterns are not domain-specific problems. They surface across every domain of family wealth advising. They are individual issues that express themselves differently depending on which door the advisor has come through. The advisor who is focused on governance sees a negotiation failure. The family dynamics advisor sees interpersonal conflict. The leadership transition consultant sees a readiness problem. Each of them is looking at the same underlying issue from different angles.

The question is not which domain the individual identity issue belongs to. It belongs across all of them. The question is whether the advisor recognizes it regardless of which door it came in.

What It Looks Like: Four Cases

The following cases illustrate how the question of individual identity might surface. Each began as a problem that looked structural. Each was more than that.

CASE 1-

The Issue Behind The Issue

A family office principal contacted an advisor after his adult son became angry over a hiring decision. The family's chief administrative officer had been asked to interview and hire an administrative employee for one of the family businesses. One of the candidates was a friend of the son. When that candidate was not selected, the son called his father to protest the decision and later accused the chief officer of being biased against him.

At first glance, the situation appeared straightforward. The family had no clearly defined hiring process, no agreed-upon criteria for selection, and no established expectations around family involvement in employment decisions. It would have been easy to treat the issue as either a governance problem or an example of entitled behavior.

As the conversation continued, however, a different picture emerged. For the son, the hiring decision was not primarily about the position. The successful candidate happened to be connected to another branch of the family, and he experienced the outcome as confirmation of a much larger story he had been carrying - that his perspectives, relationships, and contributions mattered less than those of other family members. What appeared to be anger about a hiring decision was actually a reaction to feeling marginalized within the family system.

The conversation shifted from the mechanics of the hiring process to the meaning the son had attached to the outcome. Once that underlying concern was surfaced and discussed directly, the family was able to address both the structural issue and the personal one. The hiring process still needed clarification, but the conflict itself was not being driven by process. It was being driven by what the decision represented to the individual involved.

CASE 2-

The Exit That Didn't Hold

A family enterprise had completed a formal succession, and the founder had exited the chief executive role. On paper, the transition was done.

Within months, the founder was back in the building. He attended operational meetings he was no longer part of, weighed in on decisions that had been formally delegated, and called key employees directly — bypassing the new leadership entirely. The family's advisors framed the situation as a governance failure: the boundaries of the founder's new role had not been clearly defined, and accountability mechanisms were not yet in place. The structural diagnosis, while accurate, was not the whole story.

What it did not account for was this: the founder didn't have a strong sense of who he was when he was not running the company. For 30+ years, the enterprise had been his identity — not just his livelihood, but his purpose, his standing, his reason to get up in the morning. The succession plan had done a good job of transferring ownership and authority. However, it did not address what came next for him as a person. Without a coherent sense of who he was outside the role he had just left, he kept returning to the only identity that felt real.

Once that was named directly, the conversation changed. The question stopped being how to enforce the governance boundaries and became about who he wants to be now, and what that requires. Answering it took time and deliberate work. And until it was answered, no governance structure was going to keep him out of the room.

CASE 3-

Beyond Entrenched Positions

A family engaged advisors to help a sibling and cousin group design a new governance structure to better represent the family as ownership was transitioning to the next generation. What began as a relatively straightforward discussion about representation quickly became contentious. Conversations that should have been procedural became emotional. Positions hardened. Family members began questioning one another's motives. Meetings ended with little progress despite months of discussion.

Initially, the advisors viewed the situation as a decision-making problem. The family lacked a clear process for evaluating alternatives, communication had deteriorated, and participants seemed increasingly entrenched in their positions. The debate appeared to be about governance design.

As the conversations continued, however, it became clear that the proposed structure carried very different meanings for different family members. For one branch of the family, equal representation symbolized belonging and legitimacy. For another, changing the governance model felt like a challenge to contributions and responsibilities they believed their branch had carried for years. What looked like disagreement over governance was, in part, a disagreement over identity, status, and place within the family system.

The discussion shifted from "What governance model should we adopt?" to questions that had previously remained unspoken: What is each person trying to protect? What does this outcome mean to them personally? What fears or assumptions are attached to the positions they are taking? As those conversations unfolded, family members became better able to distinguish the governance problem from the personal meaning attached to it. Only then was the family able to make meaningful progress on the structural decisions in front of them.

CASE 4-

What The Plan Didn't Account For

A wealth advisor worked with a couple whose three adult children, all in their late 30s and early 40s, had been raised with a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency. The parents were proud that each child was career-motivated and financially independent. When their middle daughter asked for a substantial distribution from a family trust, the request landed as a disruption.

The situation seemed straightforward. The family had always been clear that legacy assets were not intended to supplement everyday living. The parents worried that approving an unplanned distribution would undermine that principle and appear unfair to the other children.

In a conversation facilitated by the advisor, a different picture emerged. The middle daughter had chosen a teaching career, professionally fulfilling, personally meaningful, and far less financially rewarding than her siblings' paths. As she and her partner began thinking about starting a family, the gap between her circumstances and theirs had become impossible to ignore. She wasn't asking for a handout. She was asking to be seen.

What the parents had not accounted for was this: their commitment to self-sufficiency was a value they had applied uniformly to children whose lives had turned out very differently. The structural principle was consistent. The individual circumstances were not. Their daughter had made choices that reflected exactly what they had raised her to value: purpose over income, contribution over accumulation, and those choices had quietly placed her outside the safety net the family assumed she shared.

Once that was named, the conversation changed. The parents recognized that honoring the individual meant accounting for the person, not just the principle. They approved the distribution for a down payment on a home for her growing family, and established a process for evaluating future requests that preserved their values while making room for individual circumstances. More importantly, they told their daughter directly that her path was not a departure from what they had hoped for her. It was an expression of it.

Each of these cases seemed to point to a potential structural issue, but the full story included the individuals and their emotional needs. Recognizing the difference is an important skill that advisors can develop.

What To Look For

The deeper questions of identity, belonging, and meaning often remain hidden until they are named. Once identified, they are recognizable in almost every engagement, like the ones below:

- A rising generation member who participates in development programs, governance processes, or family meetings but contributes little to nothing original. Present in body, absent in engagement.
- A family member who accepts a role without being asked whether they truly want it, or without being given space to answer honestly.
- A founder who has agreed to step back but keeps re-engaging. Attends every meeting, weighs in on transferred decisions, cannot stay out of the room.
- A governance negotiation that becomes inexplicably personal. Positions harden, conversations deteriorate, and agreement stays out of reach.
- A previously vocal family member who has gone quiet, stops contributing, pushing back, or defers to whoever applied the most recent pressure.
- A post-transition founder or exiting leader with no second chapter. Resources and time exist, but personal direction doesn't.
- An individual described as 'difficult' or 'resistant' when the actual issue is that they may have no stable sense of who they are outside the role being negotiated or feel lack of permission to express it safely.
- An advisory engagement that stalls for reasons nobody can clearly name when the structural work is sound.

None of these examples is a diagnosis on its own. But when they appear in the context of role transition, the individuals should be one of the first things to look at, not the last.

What To Do About It

The advisor's role is to recognize when the underlying issue is not structural, but personal and emotional, and to surface and address the real issues accordingly.

THREE QUESTIONS THAT HELP CLARIFY WHETHER THE INDIVIDUAL LAYER IS ACTIVE:

- Does this person have a clear sense of who they are outside the family role? Not what they value or aspire to but what they actually and consistently do when they are at their best, not in a specific role or context.
- Have the expectations for this role been negotiated directly with the individual rather than assumed, inherited, or imposed? Has there been a real conversation about what they need and what they are prepared to commit to?
- Does this person know what they are moving toward, not just what they are leaving behind? Is there a next chapter, or just an exit?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no" or "not sure", the issue deserves direct attention before the structural work proceeds. Proceeding without it is not wrong, but it poses a real risk that the transition will be unsuccessful or painful.

The range of people equipped to do this work is broad: qualified coaches, psychologists, transition specialists, and practitioners who work at the individual level in family enterprise contexts. They share a focus on the people as well as the system and the specific ability to create the conditions under which an individual can articulate who they are, commit to what they will protect, and identify where they are going. When that work is done well, it does not compete with the structural work already underway. It makes the structural work hold.

A Final Note

The Ten Domains of Family Wealth framework defines the landscape of what ultra-high-net-worth families need and what advisors must be able to deliver. The individual is present in every one of those domains as the person who must inhabit each governance structure, execute each succession plan, fulfill each philanthropic intention, and show up to each family meeting with something unique to contribute.

The work isn't choosing between structural sophistication and human complexity - it's integrating them. The best advisors make a consistent effort to honor the individual layer, not as a separate conversation for when things go wrong, but a standing question built into every engagement: who is this person, and are they ready for what is being asked of them?

Structures matter. So do the people inside them.

About the Authors

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Perry Gladstone is a Family Enterprise Leadership Specialist with 16 years of practice coaching and advising founders, rising-generation members, and the advisors who serve them. He is the originator of the Individual Succession Plan (ISP) framework.

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