Built on One Person. Ready for Many: Leadership Transition in Founder-Led Business

The founder, or family leader, is often central to a company's identity and culture. But when every decision, relationship, and product direction runs through one person, the business becomes vulnerable. Long-term continuity requires building authority beyond the founder - and this lies at the heart of many owner-led and family-owned businesses.

It was also a central theme of the latest edition of the Family-Owned Businesses Live Talk Series at Pedersen & Partners. This time, we hosted Jon Woon, Founder and CEO of Infinium Robotics, for a conversation on one of the most difficult transitions in founder-led businesses: moving from personal drive and entrepreneurial urgency toward structure, governance, and continuity.

The session was led by Marek Petruš, Client Partner and Global Head of the Family Business Practice Group, and brought together colleagues from across the firm's global offices. Drawing on Jon's experience building Infinium Robotics from an early-stage venture into a more structured organisation, the conversation explored themes that resonate strongly in the family business world: succession, merit, loyalty, governance - and the founder's ability to let go.

The founder must be able to step back

A recurring theme was the trade off between founder energy and organizational maturity. In the early years, the founder's personality can be the force that keeps people together, especially through uncertainty, failure, and market resistance.

Marek Petruš framed the core tension directly: how does a founder maintain passionate team followership while introducing governance, principles, and management layers?

Jon's answer was clear: the founder must learn not to become the company's ceiling.

"I try not to think that I'm the smartest person in the room. In fact, if I'm the smartest person in the room, then why should I hire the people in the room?"

Jon described this as a shift from a personality-driven culture to a principle-driven one. The business must be strong enough to survive disagreement, customer feedback, internal challenge, and leadership transition.

Governance starts with humility, not bureaucracy

The conversation also challenged the idea that governance is only about formal boards, reporting lines, or decision rights. Jon described governance more simply: the discipline to listen, admit mistakes, and make decisions based on principles rather than ego.

This is particularly relevant in family-owned businesses, where formal governance structures often arrive later than the business needs them. The first step is not always a committee or policy. Sometimes it is the founder's willingness to let others challenge the product, meet customers, own decisions, and take responsibility.

Jon explained that, as Infinium Robotics matured, he began involving the wider team more visibly. He let team members meet customers, speak externally, and own parts of the product journey. That changed the internal culture.

"A company cannot be built on the founder. It has to be about building successful products."

This is a useful principle for family businesses as well. The company must not only preserve the founder's legacy. It must turn that legacy into something operational, transferable, and capable of being led by others.

Pride can become a business risk

One of the most practical lessons came from Jon's reflections on failure and pivoting. Infinium Robotics initially explored drone technology for restaurant food delivery. The idea attracted attention, but the product-market fit was weak. The drones could carry only limited weight, restaurant margins were too low, and the economics did not support the model. Hence, we had to pivot from the F&B industry to the logistics industry where the economics made a lot of sense. The harder part was not recognizing the problem. It was convincing the team to move away from something they had invested in emotionally and technically.

"Product-market fit is very important."

For founder-led and family-owned companies, this is often where legacy becomes complicated. A product, market, or way of working may carry emotional meaning because it belongs to the founder's story or to the family's history. But any emotional attachment can delay necessary decisions.

Jon's message was direct:

"We should not get pride in the way. If pride gets in the way, then I think it's the end of the company."

The discussion made an important distinction: conviction is necessary, but pride can become dangerous when it prevents the business from listening to customers, accepting market signals, or changing direction early enough.

Change will not keep everyone, and that may be necessary

Gianluca Orecchini, Client Partner, Industrial Practice at Pedersen & Partners, brought the discussion back to the human cost of pivoting. He asked what happened to the engineers who were initially disappointed by the change in strategy, and whether they remained with the company.

Jon answered openly: some stayed, some left.

"It is okay for people to leave, because you'll find others who are more aligned along the way."

This is an important point for family-owned businesses undergoing transformation. Not everyone who was right for the first chapter will be right for the next one. That does not make the past wrong. It means the business has changed.

In Jon's case, the first group of engineers had believed in the restaurant technology use case. The next group believed in the warehouse and logistics application. The company had to accept that strategic clarity may also create talent turnover.

The lesson is not to treat turnover lightly. It is to recognize that alignment matters. A company cannot scale if its people are committed to a past version of the business.

The right people are not always the most impressive on paper

Another strong point in the discussion was the challenge of bringing senior external talent into a founder-led business. Marek asked what Jon found most difficult when attracting senior people from outside to help scale the company.

Jon's answer was not about credentials. It was about values.

"It's easy to find people who have excellent credentials. But it's difficult to find someone who has the correct mentality, correct values, and correct principles."

This is highly relevant to family-owned companies. External leaders can bring professionalism, structure, and growth experience, but if they do not understand the culture of the business, they may struggle to build trust. Equally, relying only on loyalty or familiarity can limit the company's ability to grow.

Jon described using situational questions to understand how candidates think, how they respond to problems, and whether their decision-making reflects the right principles. The conclusion was not that qualifications do not matter. Rather, qualifications are not enough.

For family businesses, the leadership question is rarely only "Can this person do the job?" It is also "Can this person protect what matters while helping the company evolve?"

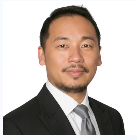
The broader lesson for owner-led and family-owned businesses

The discussion with Jon Woon was not only about robotics, start-ups, or technology. It was about a universal leadership challenge: how to let a business mature without losing its soul.

For owner-managed and family-owned businesses, the message is especially relevant. Legacy is not protected by keeping everything dependent on the founder or family. It is protected by building principles, people, governance, and merit-based structures strong enough to carry the business forward.

The founder's energy may start the company. But discipline, humility, and shared ownership are what allow it to last.

Marek Petruš
Global Head of the Family Business Practice Group
Pedersen & Partners



Jon Woon
Founder and CEO of **Infinium Robotics**