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Heirs and Errors—Hollywood Edition

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A string of Hollywood hits have been addressing [succession planning](#) with settings ranging from a New York high-rise to a Montana ranch and from pews of a megachurch to offices in hip-hop entertainment.

Although the featured businesses and storylines vary, they all have one thing in common—characters who make one bad move after another in succession planning. Their missteps are many, but here are a few examples of what not to do, courtesy of clever TV plotlines, along with some professional advice for each situation offered by Texas attorney [Barry Green](#).

It's doubtful the fictional characters would take Green's suggestions—they do, after all, thrive on drama—but with a few proactive steps, you can avoid making the same mistakes.

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The Righteous Gemstones

World-famous televangelist Eli Gemstone and his family love God, but the almighty dollar is also near and dear to their hearts. Eli and his grown children—Jesse, Judy and Kelvin—are mourning the loss of matriarch Aimee-Leigh and figuring out how to navigate life and their ministries without her. Vying for their father's approval and a piece of the Gemstone [legacy](#), the immature trio makes all the wrong moves, leaning into debauchery and crime.

**Bad move:** Jesse Gemstone is blackmailed with a video of him and his church friends partying with prostitutes and snorting cocaine in the first episode. The blackmailers demand \$1 million, which Jesse doesn't have because "Daddy limits [his] spending." But little sister Judy comes to the rescue with the cold hard cash she embezzled and hid in the air conditioning vent of a Sunday school classroom.

**Professional advice:** *Was Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign all for naught? Your private time is your private time, but you can't live your life so full throttle that your choices, if made public, could derail even the best made succession plans. Sure, Baby Billy might be impressed by your wild ways, but the board of directors won't be. And like Eli almost certainly tried to teach Jesse, "nothing good happens after midnight." Even the best laid plans can't survive a seedy video that becomes trending.*

**How to watch:** Originally aired 2019 to 2025 on HBO Max. Now available on multiple streaming platforms.

Succession

Brusque patriarch Logan Roy helms Waystar Royco, one of the largest media and entertainment companies in the world, while his children scheme how to gain control of the "[family business](#)." The Roy siblings—Kendall, Shiv, Roman and Connor—love their father, but the relationships are twisted, based on power plays with Logan as puppet master, rather than doting dad.

**Bad move:** Kendall is poised to take over Waystar from his aging father in the first episode, but Logan has a last-minute change of heart, announcing at his birthday lunch that he's decided to stay. A stunned Kendall asks—"And undo 18 months of corporate strategy?"

In the same scene, it's also revealed that Logan tricked Kendall into signing a revised document adding Marcia, Logan's third wife, to the family trust and giving her Logan's board seat when he dies, doubling her votes.

**Professional advice:** *Kendall, if you want to keep access to the helicopters, jet and the yacht, you're going to have to be nimble. Always have contingency plans that include worst-case scenarios. That way, when your hopes and dreams to be named CEO are postponed, you're prepared to either be a good soldier, launch a competing company with Roman and Shiv or just give up and bail to the Hamptons (like any non-serious person would do). Otherwise, you'll just end up expressing concern for "wasting 18 months of corporate strategy," which will only get you a big sigh from Logan—and deservedly so.*

**How to watch:** Originally aired 2018 to 2023 on HBO Max. Now available on multiple streaming platforms.

Empire

Hip-hop mogul Lucious Lyon is diagnosed with ALS and must decide which son will take over as CEO of Empire Entertainment upon his death. The brothers are a trio of talent—Empire CFO Andre, R&B singer-songwriter Jamal and rapper Hakeem—and Lucious pits them against each other. Ex-wife Cookie is released from prison in time to not only take a stab at reclaiming her share of the business but also reconnect with her boys.

**Bad move:** Lucious calls the boys together in the pilot episode and announces his successor will be chosen in an arbitrary way. "It won't happen today or tomorrow, but I will start grooming someone soon, and it can only be one of you," he says. The conversation has ominous overtones, as he notes with disgust that none of them appear to be prepared to take over. Shocked by his dad's methodology, Jamal compared the situation to a Shakespearean tragedy.

**Professional advice:** *Lucious, where did you read that your successor must come from a pool of limited choices? This is Empire, not Survivor. If you want the kids taken care of, that doesn't mean you have to gamble the company's very existence by putting it in any of their incapable hands. Start looking outside the organization for a possible successor who is a more suitable option. And your heirs can still be set up with an ownership/financial interest without being able to control, and potentially ruin, what you have built. The lesson: Don't limit yourself by imaginary constraints. Oh, and since you're a former drug dealer, I'd keep away from that Jesse character from Gemstones.*

**How to watch:** Originally aired 2015 to 2020 on Fox. Now available on multiple streaming platforms.

Yellowstone

Fifth-generation rancher John Dutton and his family own the largest cattle ranch in Montana: the Yellowstone. Over five seasons, he and his children—Lee, Beth, Kayce and Jamie—along with favored ranch hand Rip, battle developers, neighboring Native Americans and often each other to keep the family land intact, albeit with murderous consequences.

**Bad move:** In season 2, stoic John Dutton ignores doctor's orders to follow-up when a CT scan reveals a mass in his abdomen. It turns out to be an ulcer, and he collapses in the arena when it bursts. The only medical professional nearby—the ranch vet—cuts open his stomach and cauterizes the artery, saving his life and stabilizing him before a helicopter ride to the hospital. Once in the air he mutters that he can't die: "I have so much to do."

**Professional advice:** *If you are in the position to hand over the proverbial (and literal) reins to the ranch, define now the details of how that's going to happen. No one is guaranteed the next day, so have your succession documents in place just in case that day doesn't arrive for you. Does that sound dark? Yes. But it's not as unpleasant as having those unpredictable family members jeopardizing the whole ranch as they jockey for your vacated saddle under the Montana sky. You should guarantee the succession plans are in existence—even if it benefits the very people who probably gave you that ulcer in the first place.*

**How to watch:** Originally aired 2018 to 2024 on the Paramount Network. Now available to stream on Peacock.

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Kristen Tribe is the special projects editor for SUCCESS+ magazine and other digital projects at SUCCESS®.

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