

Brendan Langille:

A Case Study in Selection, Turnover and Company Culture in a Small Business

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to produce a case study and accompanying teaching note that would allow students to discuss various aspects of selection and hiring in a small family business. This case study follows a young protagonist who is transitioning into his parent's fast food company. He notices some troubling trends in the business such as informal hiring processes, high turnover and a poor company culture. He is essentially faced with the decision to either take the business in a new direction or continue using his parents' methods.

The accompanying teaching note details elements of the case likely to emerge in classroom discussion, and offers guiding research on these topics. The note considers the implications of the protagonist's decision and provides information on applicable industry trends. In addition, it explains the value and the process of standardizing selection and hiring in a small business. Finally, the teaching note covers different factors that affect employee engagement and reducing turnover.

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Disclaimer

The Brendan Langille case and teaching note are submitted in fulfillment of Mgmt. 6699, Research Project in Management. This case was prepared under the supervision of Dr. James O'Brien, Department of Management. Consistent with the conventions of case writing for management education:

- The case is designed to contribute to class discussion, and the author has no intention to characterize the situation described in the case as ineffective or effective management practice;
- The case is based on practice, and disguise may have been used to protect confidentiality;
- Readers of these materials are asked to respect future use of the case in classroom discussion, with particular reference to the teaching note.

These particulars are based on the standard disclaimer in use at Ivey Business Services for published cases.

Case Study

BRENDAN LANGILLE

Introduction

Brendan Langille looked up as the front door swung open. Amy was heading straight for Brendan, with something in her hand. In one motion, Amy threw the package in her hand over Brendan's head and yelled at him, "good luck replacing me!" She spun on her heels and stalked out of the store. Brendan sighed, embarrassed and angry, picked up the package and went out back to his office. He took Amy's uniform out of the plastic bag and set it aside, shaking his head.

Brendan was the general manager of a fast food company in a small town about five hours from Toronto. His parents, Doug and Catherine, had moved to this town over twenty years ago and purchased a few outlets of a popular fast-food brand as a way to be their own bosses while raising a family in a small community. Over the last few months, Brendan moved home to join the family business and purchase the company from his parents. He had grown up working behind the counter at the restaurants, trying his hand at every position. After pursuing a banking career in Toronto for several years, Brendan had decided to return to his hometown and get involved in his parents' business. He loved small town life and relished the idea of running his own business. He had

been enjoying his job so far, but Brendan was starting to realize there was room for improvement in the company's operations.

As he looked at the uniform that had just been thrown at his head, Brendan wondered what had happened. Amy had been hired about six weeks before, and she was supposed to start her shift in an hour. Now, Brendan would have to scramble to fill her shift, and the store would probably run short-staffed. Shifts were scheduled to balance expected volumes with labour costs, so losing an employee often compromised customer service and made wait times longer. The other staff scheduled to work that shift would feel extra pressure to keep up. This was beginning to be a common headache for Brendan as employees came and went quickly, costing him a lot of money and creating chaos in the restaurants. He wondered how he could reduce these kinds of incidents and get absenteeism under control.

The Fast Food Industry

In recent years, the fast food industry has changed significantly. When Doug and Catherine first started in the business, the industry was just growing in North America, allowing their company to take off. It seemed that customers sought only simple and cheap fast food and people were eager to spend their disposable income on take-away meals. In recent years, however, growth has slowed down and the industry has matured. There have been fewer

opportunities for new growth, and so fast-food companies now have to vie for their competitor's customers in order to increase sales. In light of this increasingly aggressive competition, fast food companies have realized that customer loyalty is essential to remaining profitable. Improving the customer experience and reducing speed of service have become important factors in retaining customers. Even in the Langilles' small town, customers are quick to switch brands if they experience poor service. In addition, brands have been widening their menu offerings in order to attract as many customers as possible. In light of the changing industry, working at a fast-food restaurant has become increasingly complex and involves much more than just "flipping burgers."

Company Background

Doug and Catherine Langille met in law school and both went on to practice in corporate law firms in Toronto. After working for a few years and starting a family, they began to feel burnt out and disillusioned with their chaotic urban life. They began searching for alternatives and after a few months, Doug came home with a newspaper ad looking for franchisees to own and operate several fast food restaurants in a small town several hours away. Raising their two children in a small community and being their own boss was very appealing to Doug and Catherine. So, after a few interviews and handing

over a significant chunk of their savings, they moved to their new town in rural Ontario and became the owners of four fast food restaurants. This new town was about five hours away from Toronto and had a population of roughly 30,000 people. About 30% of the area's population was between the ages of 35 and 55. Those between 20 and 30 years old accounted for 15% of the population and those between 55 and 65 made up another 15%.

This particular restaurant brand was founded on a simple value proposition. The company aimed to provide exceptional customer service and serve quality food at low prices, all in a timely fashion. The brand was also closely linked to local communities and prided itself on funding various community initiatives such as town cleanups, children's sports, and extensive local sponsorships. Doug and Catherine quickly became involved in their new community and became well known as business owners. Doug was also an experienced basketball coach and quickly joined the local high school coaching staff.

Doug and Catherine consolidated their four stores to create a holding company. While each location was separated by several kilometres, the restaurants worked closely together to share resources and staff. Doug headed operations for the company and Catherine took charge of accounting and administrative duties. While some store owners with multiple locations hired general managers, Doug and Catherine operated their stores in a very hands-on

manner and visited each location just about every day. They got to know their staff and their customers extremely well.

Each restaurant had a store manager who oversaw daily operations. All four of these managers were middle-aged women who had been in the fast-food industry most of their lives. The stores also had several supervisors that oversaw their respective shifts and reported to their manager. Each location employed about twenty to thirty people, depending on the store's size and sales volume. In total, the Langilles employed about 85-100 people, depending on the season.

The makeup of the Langille's payroll consisted mainly of women. Ninety percent of their employees were female, and more than half of those were between the ages of 35 and 55. Most of these women had been in the retail or food business for several years. Many had children and grandchildren and balanced their work with their family lives. The average employee in the Langille's company had a high school-level education and was generally uncomfortable with technology. The part-time employees consisted mainly of high school students looking for work experience and pocket money. Doug became well known for hiring his athletes and many of the store's part-time employees were high school basketball players. When the Langilles organized social events, such as BBQs or Christmas parties, they struggled to convince the younger employees to attend. The part-time and full-time employees tended not to mix socially because of the differences in age.

Brendan grew up in the stores, visiting as a child and eventually working behind the counter during high school and university. He worked just about every shift and every position on the floor, getting to know the business inside and out. After he expressed interest in returning home, Doug and Catherine developed a general manager position to give Brendan the experience he needed to become an owner. Doug and Catherine began to reduce their hours as they transitioned into semi-retirement. Brendan had essentially become a store owner with full authority and transitioned his work from “putting out fires” behind the counter to developing a more strategic outlook on the business. He noticed that things were changing and he began to see some troubling trends in the restaurants.

Over the last five years, the Langille’s average annual worker turnover rate was just about 200%. While this kind of turnover is characteristic of the industry, Brendan felt there was room for improvement. Absenteeism was also high and staff members often called in sick at the last minute. Often, one shift left in a hurry without preparing the restaurant for the next shift, who would then struggle to catch up. It is difficult to begin a shift if the store is dirty and unstocked and it creates a lot of unnecessary stress. The managers struggled to convince staff members of the importance of helping out the next shift. Occasionally, this kind of stress caused employees to bicker or even quit. Because of these things, Brendan found it difficult to create momentum and

develop employees into long-term assets. Most people just did not see themselves staying in the fast food industry as a long-term career option, and as a result, they were not motivated to perform on the job. Brendan has realized that this disengaged, short-term culture that characterizes the fast food industry makes it difficult to motivate employees to handle the growing number of complexities inherent in the job. It would likely be difficult to maintain a competitive edge over other fast food brands in the area with an underperforming workforce.

Recruitment and Hiring

Since Doug and Catherine bought the stores, their recruitment process has been conducted in a mostly ad hoc fashion. There was no formal recruitment strategy in place and they relied on walk-ins and word of mouth. Since the brand was well known, people dropped off resumés often, and there was usually a stack of recent resumes in each store. Once in a while, a store manager would place an advertisement in the local newspaper or online if a spot needed to be filled. However, they did not follow a formal job-posting template.

There was no formal career development plan in the company, and those who become managers or supervisors were usually promoted by chance. When a supervisory or managerial position arose, the Langilles did not post the job

opening internally. Instead, they often gave the position to the most senior employee.

Like the recruitment process, hiring was done informally, on an as-needed basis. As franchisees, Doug and Catherine were allowed to hire as they saw fit. The brand's corporate team offered some guidelines on hiring practices and standards, but Doug and Catherine relied more on their instincts. Like any employer, they were required to follow provincial and federal employment regulations, but were otherwise left to their own devices.

Since turnover was high, the managers conducted interviews whenever a new resume or walk-in arrived in the restaurant. Doug felt that interviews were the best way to assess a candidate, since working in the restaurants required constant face-to-face interaction. Each store manager was responsible for setting up and conducting the first interview. There were no formal interview templates and the questions were made up on the spot. After sitting in on several interviews, Brendan noticed that the managers were uncomfortable interviewing candidates and lacked any real interview training. If the manager believed, based on their impressions, that a candidate was promising, they set up a second interview with Doug. These interviews were also highly informal and Doug made up his questions on the spot. When making the hiring decision, he went with his "gut feeling." Doug hired about one candidate out of every four that applied. During the summer months, this ratio increased to

about one in three, because of the need for more employees. Summer tourist traffic boosted the restaurant's sales each year by about 15-20% between May and September and the stores required several extra staff to handle the influx of customers.

Occasionally, candidates were hired on the spot without any formal screening. Sometimes this was done out of desperation, which was likely to occur after Amy's departure. The managers felt pressured to put a body on the floor or else the rest of the staff will feel stressed and the restaurant's performance will suffer. Alternatively, Doug or Catherine may hire somebody as a favour to a friend or family member. In fact, Amy had been the granddaughter of a loyal customer who had asked Doug to hire her as a favour. Not wanting to displease his regulars, Doug offered her a job on the spot. Amy seemed energetic enough at first, but the managers quickly noticed that she was unable to multitask on the job. Working in the restaurant required a balancing act of attending to customers, keeping the store clean, and striving for service goals. Amy struggled to manage everything and had a hard time focusing on a single task. In the end, she received poor feedback from her manager and felt a lot of pressure during her shifts. Her dramatic exit was likely the result of overwhelming stress.

Brendan's Decision

Despite some of their ad hoc methods, Doug and Catherine's policies and practices have worked well for them for over twenty years. They ran their business by solving problems as they arose and they focused mostly on the day-to-day activities. As owners, they spent a lot of time in each store, overseeing daily operations. They worked hard to get to know their employees and understand operational details. In doing so, they had been able to keep their food costs down and minimize their equipment repair costs. By being so hands-on, the Langilles ran a tight ship with profitable margins.

Doug and Catherine earned a reputation as good employers in their community. Some employees worked for them for many years, and formed great relationships. The Langille's methods have worked well for them, resulting in long periods of significant growth. The brand has enjoyed very strong customer loyalty, with many regulars coming back day after day. The Langilles felt confident in their decision to leave their urban life behind.

Brendan sat in his office looking at the crumpled uniform. He knew that the next few days would be chaotic as he tried to fill Amy's shifts. A lot of time and money had been wasted in training Amy. The bigger picture was even more troubling since Brendan's parents had certainly been successful in the past. The short-term culture that was so characteristic of the fast-food industry didn't seem to hurt their profits too badly. However, things were changing and he was

certain there was room for improvement. Brendan wondered what his next move should be.

Teaching Note

BRENDAN LANGILLE

Overview

This case describes a recent MBA grad returning home to assume responsibility for his parent's four fast food restaurants. The protagonist is faced with a serious staffing issue, and must decide whether to continue running the business in the same way his parents have for twenty years or to pursue a different direction. He faces a generally disengaged workforce in the restaurants and must decide whether this culture can stand up to the changes that are occurring in the industry. The case enables readers to discuss retention measures and overcoming a negative culture. In addition, readers can examine the importance of standardized recruitment and hiring practices and look at the implications of decision-making in a family business.

Synopsis

In this case the protagonist, Brendan Langille, is confronted by an employee who angrily quits on the spot. Brendan is faced with the chaotic aftermath of the episode and struggles to fill the employee's shifts. These kinds of incidents are common in his family's restaurants and he believes that they suggest a dysfunctional culture within the company. In the fast food industry,

turnover is high and employees are often disengaged on the job, because they do not expect to work for the employer over the long term.

At the strategic level, Brendan has realized that the fast food industry is changing and becoming more complex in response to increasing competition among brands. He feels these changes will be difficult to manage with a short-term, disengaged workforce. This contributes to his belief that there is an urgent need for change.

Brendan's parents have relied on mostly informal practices during their ownership to recruit and hire employees and Brendan suspects this may be contributing to the company's high turnover rates. There are some problems in the restaurants including a lack of teamwork amongst shifts and a lack of cooperation amongst various employees. Brendan notices that his younger employees are particularly difficult to engage on the job. He contemplates that despite these difficulties, his parents have been successful in the past and their turnover problems have not affected the company too badly. Ultimately, Brendan is faced with the decision to take the business in a new direction and introduce better hiring and retention practices or continue using his parents' more ad hoc methods.

Teaching Objectives

1. The importance of standardizing recruitment and hiring practices, the implications of turnover, and initiating retention measures in a business.
2. Analyzing the foundations of a company's culture and discussing how a business leader can change a negative business environment.
3. The importance of managing relationships during the decision-making process in a family business.

This case is designed for classes focusing on selection and recruitment and is appropriate for MBA and undergraduate students. The case also discusses company culture and organizational change, which would lend itself to organizational behavior classes at both the graduate and undergraduate level. In addition, this case could be discussed in workshops dedicated to family business.

Suggested Student Assignment

1. Should Brendan continue to do things as his parents have, or choose a different direction for staffing in the organization?
2. What are the risks and benefits involved with both choices?
3. What specific tools should Brendan adopt for making hiring decisions? Why? What does the evidence say? What contextual factors might affect these choices?

4. How should Brendan think about turnover in the organization?
5. What are some organizational culture implications of Brendan's situation? How should he consider the major sub-groups in the restaurants?

Analysis

Brendan's Decision

Discussion could begin with the implications of Brendan's decision to pursue a different direction for the family business. Students could first discuss the changes in the fast food industry that are affecting operations and consider the major factors on each side of the argument. The menus at many fast food restaurants have become much more complicated and consumers are demanding superior service (Min & Min, 2011). As the job becomes more complex, more training is needed to develop employees. Discussing this phenomenon could help students identify that Brendan is going to need well-trained employees to handle these incoming complexities. A culture of high turnover will likely hinder this process and make it difficult for Brendan to develop his workforce. Turnover rates are linked to business performance, and as turnover increases, performance and profit margins generally decrease in an organization (Eriksen, 2010). In addition, high turnover can have negative effects on those still working in the organization. Current employees could feel

added pressure on the job to make up for departing employees, leading to an overall negative culture that increases the likelihood of more turnover (Maertz, Wiley, LeRouge and Campion, 2010). Students could conclude that high turnover will likely make it very difficult for Brendan to manage the changes occurring in the fast food industry while maintaining profitability.

Exploring industry trends could also help students decide whether Brendan is making the right choice in seeking to reduce turnover or accepting current levels. The case indicates that Brendan's parents have not addressed high turnover in the past, and he is concerned that it may not be worth changing. However, the fast food industry has realized that turnover is costly and companies are developing new ways to encourage long-term employment in the industry (Spurgeon, 2001). Companies are attempting this by offering benefits such as scholarships, stock options, retirement plans and health plans (Spurgeon, 2001). Discussing these trends would help readers identify that Brendan's decision to address high turnover could be supported by industry benchmarks. The instructor could discuss the feasibility of these ideas for a small business owner such as Brendan.

When discussing the consequences of Brendan's choice, students could also consider the implications of the decision on his relationship with his parents. Family businesses often place a unique set of stressors on decision making because of the intimate relationships involved. Often, people working

in their family's business feel more pressure to conform to familial opinions than to pursue their own interests (Schulze, Lubatkin & Buchholtz, 2003). This could potentially lead to decisions that negatively affect the business. Brendan has to consider that by choosing to pursue a different direction with the business he may unintentionally harm his relationship with his parents. His parents may disagree with him or be offended by the implications of his decision. Students could discuss the merits of each option and decide what will likely have the most positive results.

Standardizing the Hiring Process

Students should note that the Langille's informal hiring process is likely contributing to higher turnover and negatively affecting the business. This case is purpose-built to discuss the importance of standardized recruitment and hiring procedures in a business, allowing readers to develop comprehensive recommendations for improvement. Discussion could lead to creating a specific plan to standardize the Langille's hiring process. Doug currently hires new employees in a fairly informal way. The company has a tradition of hiring people on the spot without screening or interviewing them. This has sometimes resulted in poor hiring decisions and employee turnover, as seen in Amy's situation. Small business owners are prone to relying mostly on intuition when making hiring decisions, which may lead to poor choices (O'Brien, 2011). Without screening for basic requirements, an employer can miss crucial

information that is used to make a calculated hiring decision (Goodstein & Davidson, 1998). Students should note that developing a formal screening process would help reduce these kinds of choices and force the company to make more informed decisions when it comes to hiring. In addition, the interview process described in the case is highly informal and usually made up on the spot. The managers lack training, are uncomfortable during interviews and their questions are not standardized. Without proper training, the managers are likely to encounter several problems and may receive inadequate or inappropriate responses. The managers may lack the ability to properly probe candidates for further explanations or ask appropriate follow up questions, which can lead to poor interview data (Billiet & Loosveldt, 1988). Instructors can facilitate a discussion that identifies these problems within the Langille's informal selection process.

When developing a recommendation, case readers could outline how to standardize the hiring process for Brendan. This begins with developing a clear job description for restaurant positions, determining an appropriate screening method and improving the interview process. These steps are pertinent to the scope of this case and allow the students to consider the unique characteristics of Brendan's position. As a small business owner, Brendan only has a certain amount of resources and hiring responsibilities fall solely on his shoulders. In order to first develop a job description, Brendan would have to gather data

regarding the positions including required aptitudes, amount of physical activity involved, environmental conditions, educational requirements, etc. (Catano, Wisener, Hackett & Methot, 2010). Students could consider the different ways Brendan should retrieve this data, bearing in mind he operates a small business. They could consider low-cost, easy to develop methods that will still ensure reliable results (O'Brien, 2011). These include directly interviewing store managers, job observation, employee tests, and employee interviews. The instructor could also point out publicly available data such as O*Net and Human Resources Development Canada. Once various criterion are identified, students could assess job-relatedness and determine whether the knowledge, skills, and abilities they discuss are appropriate for a restaurant job.

Once a job description is clearly outlined, it becomes much easier to properly screen applicants. If Brendan understands the detailed requirements of each job, he can better assess whether applicants have the pertinent experience, and skills. The instructor could point out that resume scanning would be an appropriate screening method since it is less complicated and more affordable for a small business owner such as Brendan (Catano et al., 2010). By incorporating an official resume screening process, he can avoid hiring people on the spot, and instead funnel all candidates through this initial screening process. If he is asked to hire somebody as a favour, he could reply by

requesting a resume to first identify if the candidate is suitable for the next step in the hiring process.

The next step in standardizing the hiring process includes developing a more standardized interviewing process to help Brendan make better hiring decisions. By incorporating job description information into specific interview questions, Brendan would be much more likely to improve the validity and reliability of the overall process (Catano et al., 2010). Validity refers to the extent to which an instrument actually measures what it is supposed to measure and reliability refers to the extent to which an instrument consistently measures data (Berry, 2003). In this case, the interview is more likely to consistently measure the most appropriate data if it is carefully developed using job analysis information. Administering the same interview questions each time will produce much more reliable information with which to make the hiring decision (Henemen, Judge, Smith & Summers, 2010). To further the discussion, students could actually develop interview questions they feel would benefit Brendan's search for suitable employees. Overall, class discussion could identify that by having a more structured selection plan, Brendan would have more reliable information with which to make his hiring decisions. This would lead to more appropriate hires, and lower the number of informal, spontaneous hires, resulting in lower turnover for the business.

Addressing Disengagement

When discussing the final assigned questions, readers might consider each sub-group within the restaurants and decide how best to address their specific lack of engagement. These subgroups include Brendan's part-time teenaged employees and his full-time, older employees who are mostly female with families of their own. Discussing the differences between the two generations could shed light on what motivates each subgroup and help readers develop specific recommendations for improving engagement on the job. The young employees can be categorized as Generation Y and their strengths and weaknesses are well researched and documented. Cranston (2012) explains that "Gen Yers can multi-task with great fluidity and are technologically savvy. They instant message, tweet, blog and email. Appreciative of frequent and well-timed feedback, they want to share and collaborate, and they tend to respond well to communication that incorporates action words, humour and a fun and informal learning environment." (p. 20). Contributing to a company's overall success is also very important to Generation Y employees (Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012). Discussion could highlight these generational characteristics to help students develop ideas that could improve engagement among the restaurant's young employees. For example, readers could consider the idea of a reverse-mentoring program that would allow younger employees to teach older employees to use technology in the stores. This recommendation utilizes the

strengths that characterize Brendan's young employees, namely their love of technology and their desire to earn responsibility and contribute to their company's overall success.

The Langille's older, family-oriented employees have different characteristics and motivations that readers could discuss in order to further develop their recommendations. Many of Brendan's full-time employees have families and they balance their work lives with their home lives. Acknowledging this balance and incorporating family values into the company's policies could help Brendan engage his parent-aged employees. Allen (2001) found that employees who have families are more likely to enjoy their job, be more engaged and stay with their company longer if they perceive that their company values family life and actively seeks to create an environment that allows employees to balance work and family. The first step in creating such an environment involves offering family-friendly benefits such as scholarships, health plans with family coverage, or child-care subsidies (Allen, 2001). By developing these kinds of benefits, a company makes it clear that they care about their employees and they share the same values. The instructor could point out what motivates older employees and foster a discussion about retaining this particular subgroup in order to help students develop thorough recommendations for improving employee engagement.

The case indicates there is little emphasis on career development in the restaurants and students may identify this as an opportunity to improve employee engagement. Discussions could include analyzing the importance of career development in workplaces and the effect it can have on engagement and retention. A study performed by the 2014 Kelly Global Workforce Index found that over half of the 230,000 employees interviewed worldwide would prefer to receive more training on the job over higher wages (Castellano, 2014). These numbers show that many employees highly value the prospect of developing their careers. The ability to advance one's career is negatively linked to turnover intention, indicating that the more opportunity one has to develop their skills or increase their status in their current job, the less likely they will leave (Zhao & Zhou, 2008). If not provided for them, employees will often seek opportunities elsewhere, as external opportunities for growth and career development are strong motivators to leave an organization (Stahl et al., 2009). Students may deduce that by creating and actively promoting opportunities to grow within the organization, Brendan could reduce turnover in the restaurants.

Finally, students could discuss the implications of the lack of teamwork in the restaurants and develop a recommendation for increasing collaborative behavior. According to the case, the different shifts work poorly together, resulting in bickering and even turnover. The different age groups in the

workplace do not seem to cooperate or at least socialize together, which also hinders teamwork. According to one source, “effective teamwork can increase organizational productivity and job efficiency...[it] can reduce human errors and promote job satisfaction...[and] maintain safe conditions in complex and stressful environments. Indeed, teamwork can make organizations better and help accomplish their goals and missions” (Sala, Bowers & Edens, 2001, p. ix). The company may benefit from actively promoting teamwork in the restaurants. The instructor could discuss the possibility of switching tasks and shifts in the restaurants to improve teamwork and job enrichment. By changing roles and trying out different responsibilities, employees are more likely to have a deeper understanding of their co-worker’s jobs and better connect with them (Gratton & Erickson, 2008). Employees could try working a different shift in order to gain a better understanding of how each shift impacts restaurant performance. Instructors could point out this option and initiate a discussion on the importance of teamwork in engaging employees and lowering turnover, allowing students to develop thorough recommendations.

Key Points

The instructor can make several points to wrap up the class discussion and finalize the case.

1. Standardizing the selection and hiring process in a small business will likely help Brendan hire more appropriate people and have fewer incidents like Amy's. Resume screening and interviewer training will help the company make more calculated decisions and avoid hiring the wrong people.
2. Introducing retention measures and addressing specific subgroups within the company will help Brendan engage his employees. By addressing the specific characteristics of each group, he is more likely to pinpoint their various motivations and develop a more strategic plan to increase engagement and lower turnover.
3. Brendan's decision carries multiple risks and stakeholders, including his relationship with his parents and the success of the business.

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