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People of Future Agriculture; Trust and Succession in Family Businesses

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational transfer, or succession, is often a goal for family businesses in general, and family farms in particular. This challenging objective is aided or hindered by interpersonal trust between family members. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the role of trust in succession so that those involved can observe the intergenerational behavioral patterns and estimate the source of trust/mistrust, or they can evaluate the trust issues and predict what behavioral patterns to expect. This meta study of the qualitative research literature on family businesses and succession revealed recurring patterns of intergenerational behavior as it relates to the essential component of trust. Character and competence influence the ability of business founders/predecessors and their children/successors to work within an area of trust, shaping intergenerational relationships and producing characteristic family business behavior patterns. Four typical interactive patterns include long-term stability, authoritarian rule, nepotism and sibling rivalry. Family member trust directly affects, and is affected by, family relationships, which, in turn influence both business performance, and the likelihood of successful intergenerational succession for the business itself.

KEYWORDS: family business; succession; trust; sibling rivalry

People of Future Agriculture; Trust and Succession in Family Businesses

Family businesses (FBs) make up a large proportion of businesses around the world and contribute greatly to the global economy. They have the paradoxical reputation of being long-term, resilient and stable, or of being short lived and producing environments full of conflict and drama. The family farm is a quintessential family business and the backbone of agriculture worldwide, yet it, too, can be either established and robust, or full of struggle and disagreement.

While the desire to pass on the farm may be an integral part of many family farms, relatively few of them are fortunate enough to see this procedure happen successfully. The process of succession has a disruptive potential and is a perilous time in the life cycle of a family farm or business (Osnes, Uribe, Hok, Yanli Hou, & Haug, 2017; Williams *et al.*, 2013). Many FBs (approximately 70%) fail to survive to the second generation, around one in ten make it to the third generation, and only about 3% continue to the fourth generation (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Solomon, *et al.*, 2011; Ruggieri, Pozzi & Ripamonti, 2014; Williams *et al.*, 2013). Although transgenerational succession has proved difficult for a large majority of FBs, it

continues to be a fundamental goal for many of them (Gudmunson & Danes, 2013), and those businesses are willing to work through the succession process in order to achieve this ambitious and challenging objective.

Methodology

This study considers the aspect of trust as it affects FBs. While trust has an impact on all businesses, it influences FBs in distinctive ways because of the interaction between the family and the business systems. Family businesses form characteristic patterns partly based on the level of trust between family members, and such patterns affect the working environments and the outcomes of the business. An understanding of how trust affects patterns of interpersonal behavior and succession, can help FBs increase the chances of successful long-term viability. With an understanding of trust and its consequences, those involved can either view the patterns and analyze where the trust issues occur, or conversely, know where the trust issues are and predict what kinds of behaviors may result.

Different levels of predecessor and successor trust combine to produce distinct patterns of behavior which affect FBs, particularly in terms of intergenerational

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	Trust of Predecessor	
	high trust	low trust
Trust of Successor	high trust	1)
	low trust	3)
		2)
		4)

Figure 2: Predecessor/Successor Trust matrix.

high trust and successor high trust, 2) predecessor low trust and successor high trust, 3) predecessor high trust and successor low trust, and 4) predecessor low trust and successor low trust.

Results

Behavioral outcomes or patterns fall into distinct categories depending on the reciprocal abilities of the predecessor and successors to trust each other to function in an intergenerational FB. These categories include successful succession, autocratic rule, nepotism and sibling rivalry.

Category 1), successful succession, shows high predecessor and high successor trust. It has been shown that the levels of trust in FBs significantly and positively influence cohesion and profitability (Ruiz Jimenez *et al.*, 2015).

The ability of the predecessor to move into an area of trust is indicated by the willingness to share control, and demonstrated by such actions as grooming, training and communicating explicit and tacit knowledge with the successor (Carr & Ring, 2017; Williams, *et al.*, 2013). The capacity of the successor to move into an area of trust is shown by a readiness to take on new responsibility regarding leadership and/or work related roles (Marler, *et al.*, 2017). This combination encourages cooperation and collaboration as both parties are able to contribute to decision making and innovation. Having a common purpose and high levels of involvement by family members creates a sense of psychological ownership that motivates the family to behave and act in the best interests of the business, resulting in higher levels of commitment and trust (Cano-Rubio *et al.*, 2016). Category 1) FBs deal with trust issues by making competence and character part of the FB ethos and culture.

While FBs have advantages because of the resources associated with the interactions and involvement of the family (Cano-Rubio *et al.*, 2016; Daspit *et al.*, 2017; Ruiz Jimenez *et al.*, 2015), there are also disadvantages associated with this pairing. One frequent concern is that family conflicts overflow into the business (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Kets de Vries, 1993). Relationship conflict seems to be particularly characteristic of FBs, harming the decision-making process, firm development and performance (Memili, Zellwiger & Fang, 2013). Lee & Danes (2012) suggest that the interpersonal dynamics among family business members is an important factor in the low rate of intergenerational transmission of businesses. They further warn that if family members are unable to harmonize, ameliorate relationship ruptures

and reestablish trust, their business is highly vulnerable and may even fail.

Category 2) indicates low predecessor trust and high successor trust which is demonstrated by the predecessor’s unwillingness to distribute control, even as the successors show the capacity to work within the area of trust. Although the successors might display competence, the predecessor may identify with the FB to such an extent that he is averse to letting go of, or sharing power. Having a powerful, domineering patriarch is common in FBs (Kets de Vries, 1993; Solomon, *et al.*, 2011; White, 2018). This has consequences for the FB in that it can lead to family dysfunction, low FB trust, and business stagnation.

Predecessors in this category have difficulty trusting the competence and characteristics of people other than themselves. While the predecessor’s characteristics such as industriousness and perseverance are useful for establishing and managing a business, they can be taken to an extreme (Hertler, 2014). Traits such as conscientiousness, competence, self-discipline and achievement striving, can be pushed to the point of becoming authoritarian, autocratic and controlling (Hertler, 2015). The concepts of over-conscientiousness, perfectionism, and workaholism are interrelated and are typified by high interpersonal control, and low trust or difficulty in delegating responsibility (Bovornusvakool *et al.*, 2012; Samuel & Widiger, 2011) One of the outcomes for those with low trust/high control traits is a higher likelihood of interpersonal conflicts (Steenkamp *et al.*, 2015).

Trust becomes an issue when the successors are belittled or controlled by their powerful father and are therefore afraid to challenge him; they don’t trust themselves to stand up to a ‘giant’ of a man. Successors also don’t trust the father to listen to new and innovative ideas or to let go of management or control, even if they technically become the head of the FB.

Category 3) is an area of high predecessor trust and low successor trust. This can be shown by the predecessor being willing, or more than willing, to share FB control with successors although the successors may lack technical ability or the capacity for leadership. While some leaders have a strong desire to pass on their business to their heirs, some successors may feel that managing the FB is more of a burden (Williams *et al.*, 2013), and take over the FB out of a sense of obligation or the perception of limited alternative opportunities for income (Pieper *et al.*, 2013).

Parents may encourage this feeling of obligation by indicating that successors need to conform in order to receive recognition from the parents, or to collect financial or other benefits from the FB (Pieper *et al.*, 2013). Some FBs emphasize family relatedness at the

expense of autonomy. Parents may employ controlled motivation so that the children perceive that their choices are forced by external factors i.e. the children act in order to avoid guilt or shame, or to manage interpersonal controls like rewards or punishments (Osnes *et al.*, 2017).

Kets de Vries (1993) notes that many predecessors simply overlook the weaknesses of their children, welcoming them into the FB regardless of their ability to contribute. Parents may be willing to offer pay and gifts in excess of the market value of the work as a means of encouraging their children's participation (Pieper *et al.*, 2013). When family connection trumps merit or capacity it can smack of nepotism, favoritism and intra-family altruism which has an impact on other non-family FB employees (Carmon & Pearson, 2013).

The successors' inabilities have financial implications for the business as most FBs can't afford to support unproductive, unskilled family members in the long term. This situation may also postpone normal development when children are not allowed to freely make decisions regarding their involvement in the business, and children may not trust that parental attention and gifts come without 'strings attached'.

In category 4), both the predecessor and the successors show low trust. Predecessors demonstrate low trust by an unwillingness to share power and control, and perhaps even time and attention, with the successors (Kets de Vries, 1993). The founder may be completely obsessed by his business, devoting himself to its demands, and leaving him very little time for his family. In such cases children may perceive the business as the preferred 'sibling', producing intense feelings of competitiveness and jealousy among the children who never really had a chance to be the 'favorite' (Solomon, *et al.*, 2011). A parent's emotional unavailability can have ongoing repercussions for children since early feelings of mistrust, envy and jealousy are long-lasting and difficult to resolve (Kets de Vries, 1993). Who was loved more or treated better becomes the issue at the heart of the relationship conflicts that are often transposed on to the business (Pieper *et al.*, 2013).

Deviant, self-interested, opportunistic behaviors, including theft, withholding job effort, shirking, free-riding, violence, insubordination, sabotage, poor attendance, misuse of information, drug and alcohol use and abuse, being too dependent on the family, and various types of harassment may be used by dissatisfied family members as a means of restoring control (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Dede & Ayranci, 2014). A successor who perceives him/herself as the cheated and disfavored child, may feel more entitled to unearned benefits, as a way to punish those they perceive as treating them unfairly or unjustly, and as a way to restore a sense of dignity and justice (Cooper *et al.*, 2013). When family members 'milk the business' to get what they feel entitled to, it can have devastating results for the business (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Kets de Vries, 1993).

The level of trust amongst family members influences how an FB operates, i.e. the interpersonal behavior patterns. Successful FBs are known for their high levels of trust and stewardship involving employees and the work environment. However, when trust levels are low because of attempts at interpersonal control, family members' feelings of jealousy, rivalry or forced involvement, the behaviors are dysfunctional and the business suffers.

Conclusion

Family businesses are important contributors to the economy worldwide, particularly in the area of agriculture through the family farm. An essential component in the functioning of FBs is the level of trust amongst family members which allows members to influence each other, and is shaped by the character and competence of the members themselves. Family member trust, particularly demonstrated by business predecessors/managers and their children/successors, affects interpersonal interactions, producing characteristic FB behavior patterns. These four typical interactive patterns include long-term stability, authoritarian rule, nepotism and sibling rivalry. The ability of family members to work within an area of trust directly affects, and is affected by, family relationships, which, in turn influence the performance of the business itself.

About the author

Catherine Bell is a family business partner living in central Alberta, Canada. Her family's farm is in the process of transitioning from one generation to the next. In preparation for this step, and to help others in a similar situation, she studied Occupational (I/O) Psychology, with an emphasis on family businesses, at California Southern University.

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