

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FAMILY BUSINESSES MANAGEMENT

De geração em geração: um estudo qualitativo da gestão de empresas familiares

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ABSTRACT

Individuals from the same family manage the family business, and the decision-making process is in full responsibility of the company's founder, owner, or successor. This research analyzed seven owners of small family businesses in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The study applied the qualitative approach with an exploratory character to answer the following question: How does management occur in the succession process in family businesses? The qualitative data was analyzed by importing the content transcribed from the interviews into NVivo 11 Pro software. Next, we applied Bardin's content analysis. From the analysis, four categories were identified, namely: i) family succession process; ii) professionalization; iii) family conflicts and iv) decision-making. Concerning the succession process, there was inadequate planning by the owners and a lack of professionals to assist in knowledge. As for professionalization, the interviewees invest in the education of their successors, creating the opportunity for their children to prepare through undergraduate courses and specializations. Regarding family conflicts, particular interests were perceived among family, and situations of resistance to change from the interviewees, in accepting that the successors present new ideas, business or technology opportunities that can solve some deficiency of the company. Unbalanced emotions affect decision-making. As a result, there is the need to organize succession planning in a gradual and planned way to exchange power so that both successor and family are prepared for this transition.

Keywords: Family succession, Succession process, Family businesses.

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DE GERAÇÃO EM GERAÇÃO: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO DA GESTÃO DE EMPRESAS FAMILIARES

From generation to generation: a qualitative study of family businesses management

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RESUMO

Indivíduos de uma mesma família administram o negócio familiar, e o processo de tomada de decisão é de total responsabilidade do fundador, proprietário ou sucessor da empresa. Esta pesquisa analisou sete proprietários de pequenos negócios familiares no Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. O estudo aplicou a abordagem qualitativa com caráter exploratório para responder ao seguinte questionamento: Como ocorre a gestão no processo sucessório nas empresas familiares? Os dados qualitativos foram analisados por meio da importação do conteúdo transcrito das entrevistas para o software NVivo 11 Pro. Em seguida, aplicamos a análise de conteúdo de Bardin. Da análise, foram identificadas quatro categorias, a saber: i) processo de sucessão familiar; ii) profissionalização; iii) conflitos familiares e iv) tomada de decisão. Quanto ao processo sucessório, houve planejamento inadequado por parte dos proprietários e falta de profissionais para auxiliar no conhecimento. Quanto à profissionalização, os entrevistados investem na educação de seus sucessores, oportunizando a preparação de seus filhos por meio de cursos de graduação e especializações. Em relação aos conflitos familiares, foram percebidos interesses particulares entre os familiares, e situações de resistência à mudança por parte dos entrevistados, em aceitar que os sucessores apresentem novas ideias, oportunidades de negócio ou tecnologia que possam sanar alguma deficiência da empresa. Emoções desequilibradas afetam a tomada de decisões. Diante disso, surge a necessidade de organizar o planejamento sucessório de forma gradativa e planejada para a troca de poder de forma que tanto o sucessor quanto a família estejam preparados para essa transição.

Palavras-chave: Sucessão familiar, Processo sucessório, Empresas familiares.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2022), 90% of Brazilian businesses are family businesses and represent 65% of the country's GDP. Therefore, companies managed by families employ 75% of the national workforce. The same survey pointed out that only 5% of family businesses keep alive until the third generation, and 70% end up closing their businesses in the first generation.

A survey conducted with 2,801 participants from 87 countries, including 282 interviews in Brazil, highlights high levels of trust, transparency and communication in Brazilian family businesses. The result indicates that 51% of the interviewees state that there is alignment of the family in the direction of the company (DC, 2022). Although 90% of Brazilian businesses are under family control, only 3% survive until the third generation. This is related to the lack of mechanisms to mediate and resolve conflicts of interest of family members and inattention in the preparation of successors and successful (JC, 2022).

For Aronoff, McClure and Ward (2017), a family business is founded by the leader. Its principal characteristic is the ownership and management under the helm of two or more members of the same family, who sometimes also participate in operational activities. Moreover, one of the organizational strategies of family businesses is the presence of relatives. These companies face obstacles different from other organizations, as they must make adequate succession planning, seek constant professionalization, deal with conflicts between family members, and control emotions not to interfere in decision-making.

This research is structured in sections; the next section presents the theoretical background, in which the concepts about succession in family businesses, professionalization, family conflicts, and decision-making versus emotions are described. The third section presents the methodology applied for data collection and the analysis of the results. The fourth section presents the research results, and in the fifth section, the conclusions of the research are described, given the proposed objective.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The family business originated a more modern concept in the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The term hereditary concerns the transmission of the land by inheritance; the eldest son inherited the lands from his father. Succession means the transition of family leadership, it is a planning and management process that encompasses several steps aimed at ensuring business continuity through the generations. Since, good succession planning and succession management increase the value of the business (Korine, 2017).

Individuals from the same family manage the family business, and the decision-making process is in full responsibility of the company's founder, owner, or successor (Tondo, 2018). Family businesses are fundamental to a country's economy and have significant representation in the Brazilian market share.

A family business's main characteristic is transferring decision-making power from one or more families. The family business can be understood as an enterprise in which the person responsible for managing it has been linked to the company for at least two generations. Family members have influence and power in defining the company's goals, interests, and objectives (Trevinyo-Rodriguez; Gallo, 2022).

1.1 Succession in family businesses

One of the most delicate processes of family businesses is succession, which is considered the pillar of the organization's continuity. It is the stage in which the changes in rules and practices related to decision-making occur, and a new control structure and new partnerships may arise.

The succession process offers rich opportunities for families. It's a time to make the most of family business assets, but it's also a way to perpetuate special privileges and property opportunities for new generations. It is a chance to preserve a lasting institution that will reflect the ideals and goals of the family (Korine, 2017).

The former leader must agree and cooperate without resistance to help the successor establish authority before the other employees and prepare them to deal with the possible contingencies that may arise and threaten the company's success. This step can cause concern for all parts of the company, not only the succeed and the successor, but also employees who fear the organization's future (Tondo, 2018).

For succession to occur naturally, parents must prepare their heirs over the years to adapt to the power and wealth the company can provide them and deal with such responsibility. The ideal process of succession planning is the gradual revelation of personal dreams and their integration into a goal and a course of action (Gersick et al., 2017).

1.2 Professionalization in family businesses

Professionalization is when a company adopts more modern, rational, and less personalized practices, using impersonal and coherent methods rather than intuitive ones. In family businesses, professionalization comprises two issues related to success guarantee. The first refers to adding professional family members to the organization and adopting more rational administrative methods; the second is to turn to external professionals, seeking to integrate work systems already applied in other companies (Gersick et al., 2017).

In family businesses, there may be some resistance to professionalization. In addition to representing a more rational way of making decisions and managing the company, it can mean a rupture of the cultural values of the family present in the organization (Costa; Zen; Spindler, 2021). The familiar concepts fundamental to decision-making have to make room for the new practices and rules introduced by professionals trying to establish a new business condition.

The professionalization process refers to organizational aspects and managers' awareness that separating family, management, and assets is necessary to maintain the business. It is required to consider that, to keep the company competitive in the market, the tactics used to create the business are not enough. It is necessary to analyze all aspects of this opportunity and seek to adapt to the reality of the moment to compete with competitors (Costa; Zen; Spindler, 2021).

Some companies merge family members and external professionals to occupy critical organizational positions. But there is still a particular fear on the part of the family in hiring external professionals, considering the possibility of losing control of the company, feeding the desire to preserve management and keep it in the family, which can lead to problems in modernization and processes innovation (Gersick et al., 2017).

1.3 Family conflicts

Conflict can be defined as a situation in which one individual realizes that another can compromise something they defend or consider important. The existence of conflicts in the organization may originate from the incompatibility between objectives, opinions, and attitudes (Robbins; Judge, 2020).

The origin of these frictions is often caused by the joining of different generations within the company, with different ages, methods, and functions, causing the emergence of divergences and a climate of tension within the organization (Bornholdt, 2019). Internal conflicts are invisible costs for the company, which affect the organizational environment; this power struggle and the lack of synergy between sectors can be the most significant losses within an organization.

Among the conflicts, it is highlighted: i) when the owners believe that all children should work in the family company, even if this is not their will; ii) when a sibling feels rejected before the other or believes that they work harder and is not given due value; iii) when members who do not work in the organization have more opinion on decision-making than those who experience the day-to-day life of the company; iv) when the new generations want to implement severe changes in the administration; and v) when there are divergences in the choice of who will be the successor in the company (Robbins; Judge, 2020).

The origin of various frictions can be called psychological conflicts; this happens when family members do not know how to separate relationships from organizational conviviality, and particular implications are taken into the company. As well, business-related issues are brought into the family environment. For Bornholdt (2019), the lack of separation and the mixture of the problems affects family relationships, both in the organization and leisure time, generating a feeling of distrust, anger, and resentment in the family.

1.4 Decision-making versus emotions

For Robbins and Judge (2020), emotions were once treated as the opposite of rationality and set aside within organizations. It is known that this is inevitable, and it is necessary to control and manage them to understand how to deal with these feelings since the individual at work dispenses with physical, mental, and emotional costs to practice their profession.

Feelings and emotions affect decision-making within companies and may assume constructive or contestable roles in the decision-making process. Positive feelings and emotions can help in problem resolutions, as a positive person finds better solutions to adversity, even if they are complex. The intensity of emotions and feelings compromises decision-making when there is an attempt to resolve obstacles intuitively or on impulse (Robbins; Judge, 2020).

On the other hand, the owner's feelings towards the company can impair the acceptance of essential changes for growth and operation, in addition to generating conflicts with other members of the organization, who act more rationally and realize that changes are needed for the organization to remain competitive in the market. The difficulty of accepting the changes may be related to the patriarch's appreciation for the company because he believes that his way of managing has worked so far and that the changes would be unnecessary (Bernardi, 2015).

The owner may present an exceptionally emotional and affective disability concerning the company, which can affect family relationships and the organization. Feelings and emotions vary depending on the moments the company faces. If the entrepreneur takes actions that contribute to the company's growth in the face of difficulties, feelings such as happiness and pride will take care of this, which will feel realized before family, friends, and society (Bernardi, 2015).

2 METHODOLOGY

The research applied the qualitative approach with an exploratory character. A multiple case study and content analysis, were used for the technical procedure (Bardin, 2016). The interviews were conducted online with seven small family company owners in the Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The chosen place is because it is a region of many family businesses that generate essential participation in the state economy, considered vital for its development. The interviewees' profile is characterized by male gender, mostly with elementary school education, over 50 years, and an average company time of 30 years.

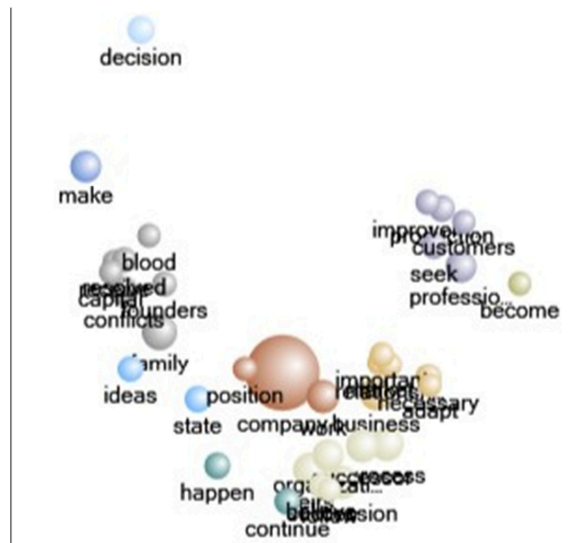
The planning of the questions characterized a structured interview, composed of 16 questions, divided into four categories: i) family succession process; ii) professionalization; iii) family conflicts and iv) decision-making. The structured questionnaire aimed to answer the following question: How does the management occur in the succession process in family businesses?

The pilot test was applied to two specialists and aimed to correct any difficulties in understanding the questions and ideas of new questions. The specialists pointed out the need to make adjustments to four questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. After transcription, the content was categorized into the NVivo 11 Pro software through "nodes" that generated word frequency, word cloud, and clusters.

3 RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data were performed with the import of the content transcribed from the interviews into NVivo 11 Pro software. Next, Bardin's content analysis (2016) was applied. From the analysis, four categories were identified, namely: i) family succession process; ii) professionalization; iii) family conflicts and iv) decision-making. Figure 1 presents an overview of the categories.

Figure 1 - Overview of categories



Source: NVivo 11.

In the cluster, decision-making for family succession is more distant from the agglomerations. The lack of planning for the succession process is the most relevant among the negative points of a family business. For Robbins and Judge (2020), much of the failure is due to the erroneous understanding that a succession is an isolated event whose purpose is restricted to the transfer of power. Succession should be seen as a process that presupposes the definition of scheduled and time activities and the precise delimitation of roles for the different parties involved. Owners and family members must commit to building a vision of the future of the organizational structure. Likewise, plan the succession by developing and training potential successors for management. After the general data analysis, four categories were identified for the discussions: i) family succession process; ii) professionalization; iii) family conflicts and iv) decision-making.

3.1 Family succession process category

In this category, the frequency showed that the words "company," "succession," and "process" are the most cited among the interviewees. All reported that the family succession process is essential for the company, and Figure 2 presents the word cloud.

Figure 2 – Category family succession process



Source: NVivo 11.

It is observed in Figure 2 that although the succession process is considered fundamental by the interviewees, there is an inadequacy in the planning of successors, seen in the low frequency of the words "continue," "successor," and "follow," that is, in the continuous process that the position requires. The succession process allows evaluating the stability of the company in the market. This means that when the company started its activities, it was recognized as an individual enterprise. After the succession, the business becomes familiar, and the misdirection of this process may end up putting the company's continuity at risk (Engel, 2019).

This is evidenced when respondent I2 reported that "succession in family businesses is a delicate process; however, the company must continue to grow and invest in new technologies to remain competitive in the market." For interviewee I7, "succession must occur at the peak of work in the company because the successor must know the reality from the beginning to not have surprises later."

To better proceed with the ownership transmission, a series of actions are pointed out to assist during the succession process. Aronoff, McClure and Ward (2017) pointed out that the family succession process is always a difficult period. A family business faces unique challenges, while other organizations measure its achievements monthly, a family business has done so for generations. While some focus on economic value, a family business needs to worry about cultural values to preserve the business for its successors. Therefore, family governance is a tool for business longevity. According to the definition of the Brazilian Institute of Corporate Governance, family governance is the system by which the family develops its relationships and business activities, based on its identity and the establishment of rules (PWC, 2022).

I4 interviewee cited that "if the successor does not understand how the company works in practice, it will be difficult to adapt within the organization." The coexistence and work in the company make the successor realize if this is his professional path and "the succeed must follow the evolution of his heir" (E5).

For Gersick (2017), relationship conflicts can arise when the succeed does not accept the changes suggested by the successor, believing that their way of managing is the most correct since they have always been at the forefront of the company's success. However, the heir must show that the patriarch can rely on their ability and responsibility to succeed them, and it is easier to transfer power when the two cooperate and adapt to each other's opinions. The possible successors can cause the company's bankruptcy if professionalization does not occur.

3.2 Professionalization category

In this category, the frequency demonstrated that the words "professionalization," "company," and "production" are the most cited. All interviewees believe professionalization is vital for the company in the search for process improvements and modernization, aiming to meet market demand. Figure 3 presents the word cloud.

Figure 3 - Professionalization category



Source: NVivo 11.

Respondents realized that managing the company in the first years of the foundation was different from the current reality. In this way, it is necessary to look for ways to improve the new demands of the market.

The professionalization category refers to adding professional family members to the organization and adopting more rational administrative methods. This perception can be identified by I5, who stated, "the most notable changes were in the technology part, in my time there were not so many demands, and nowadays we have to adapt. There were also adaptations in the on-demand production of new products by customers." Interviewee I3 stated that "it is important to seek more knowledge, making the processes more effective and practical."

It was observed that successors' professionalization is taking place in all the companies interviewed to meet a need of the company or to have a more modern and innovative view of their area of activity. Hiebl and Mayrleitner (2019) argued that professionalization covers, implicitly or explicitly: i) formal training of managers; ii) meritocracy; (iii) the existence of formalized management structures and processes; and iv) performance of managers outside the family.

I1 reported that "my daughter graduated in Business Administration to take care of the financial part and relationship with customers, while my son in Agronomy to cultivate the production of our products." Everyone agrees that professionalization should be implemented gradually, aiming at the company's and the successor's needs. According to I2, I6, and I7, it is up to the heir to feel the need to professionalize to perform the functions in the company better since studying provides a broader business view.

These and other key issues form the basis for a shared vision of the future to effectively manage a transition. One vision provides affirmation that the family, to continue the business to the next generation and addresses critical issues that every family owning companies should consider in terms of who they are and where they want the business to go (LeCouvie; Pendergast, 2017).

In addition to an articulated view, values represent an element of continuity. It is important to recognize the difference between vision and values. Values guide everyday behavior, while a vision is a desired long-term outcome. Awareness of this distinction helps families appreciate both, and in doing so, makes drawing separate visions and affirmations of values much easier if the family decides that two separate documents are important (LeCouvie; Pendergast, 2017).

As for professionalization, all interviewees have external people in their work environment but not occupying strategic positions. In this same reasoning, entrepreneurs affirmed that external professionals working in their companies do not participate in the company's decision-making, only the founders and successors.

Madison et al. (2018) specifically examined the monitoring of family and non-family employees in the professionalization of the human resources sector. The authors argued that when there is equality of non-family members and family members, there is a strengthening in the relationship between professionalization and financial performance. Including non-family members benefits the organization's performance, and external professionalization is a positive factor.

3.3 Family conflicts category

In this category, the frequency showed that the words "company," "family," and "conflicts" are the most cited among the interviewees. All interviewees believe that family conflicts over the company's administrative issues should be resolved in the workplace. In contrast, if they are conflicts between family members, these should be resolved outside the organizational environment. Figure 4 presents the word cloud.

Figure 4 - Category family conflicts



Source: NVivo 11.

Figure 4 shows that it is important to focus on possible conflicts that permeate the relationships experienced in family businesses and can interfere positively or negatively at this stage. Among them, family conflicts stand out, especially among parents and children, because they are considered relevant in the definition of the career and, consequently, in the succession process in a family business.

Interviewees I2, I3, I6, and I7 stated that they have conflicts in their companies related to innovation, new technologies, and divergences of ideas. The other interviewees, I1, I4, and I5, said there are no conflicts in their organizations because the founders' and successors' ideas and interests are very similar.

Family businesses present people connected by blood ties in different functions, which can cause conflicts in decision-making when taken in a way that benefits one another (Tondo, 2018). Another important point is that all working in the company should receive adequate remuneration compatible with their role, avoiding friction and mistrust regarding misusing the company's capital (Bernardi, 2015).

Respondents I2, I5, and I6 stated that members receive adequate remuneration for their position and perceive the need for this capital division. Entrepreneurs I1, I3, I4, and I7 reported that revenue happens differently. Family conflicts depend on the owners' awareness that it is necessary to separate family, management, and assets so that the business has continuity.

Bornholdt (2019) mentioned that running a family business is knowing how to deal with all the complexity of the affective and financial relationships existing in the organization, with the numerous differences of interest between family members and other people involved in the business management process and, mainly, with the inevitable conflicts that, not being well managed, can lead to the destruction of an institution. As far as conflicts are concerned, it highlights those originating from the relationship between parents and children and discussions between siblings, spouses, uncles, and cousins.

3.4 Decision-making category versus emotions

In this category, the frequency showed that the word "emotions," "attitude," and "feeling" are the most cited among the interviewees. The interviewees reported that feelings and emotions affect the company's decision-making since if the entrepreneur does not know how to deal with what they are feeling, this can lead them to make decisions impulsively based on the moment, without being able to reason. Figure 5 presents the word cloud.

Figure 5 - Decision-making category versus emotions



Source: NVivo 11.

This interpretation becomes evident in the interviews applied. Interviewees I2, I3, I4, and I7 said they have already made decisions or attitudes that they regret. I3 noted, "in the middle of the disagreement, the atmosphere gets heavy, and things are said that should be avoided." I4 believes that it is necessary to stop and breathe when this happens. If something that may have hurt has been said, it is essential to have empathy, recognize the error and apologize.

Therefore, executives must maintain a balance between reason and emotion to achieve good business performance. In this sense, if the company has a culture consistent with its values and principles, it will possibly be respected by its members, and if an external professional is manageable, it must also understand and respect it.

Concern about legacy tends to influence decisions regarding continuity, even when continuity is inadequate to meet the challenges faced by the company. Thus, a policy and standards statement that limits ownership flexibility prevents the company from going into new areas and states that consensual decision-making can make it impossible or very difficult for the company to respond to competitive challenges from new deep-pocketed players from outside the industry. In other words, a concern for the legacy can keep the company stuck in its ways just when it needs to adapt most to changing market conditions (Baron; Lachenauer, 2021).

I1, I5, and I6 stated that they did not take any wrong attitude within the organization. I5 said, "we always support and encourage each other so that there are no problems, it is discussed the subject and seen if it is on the right track and if it is given continuity or the idea is discarded."

It should be noted that psychology plays an important role in the process succession, at various levels of analysis: i) leader as an individual; ii) relationship between the leader and the successor; iii) shared identity of the leader and organization. For the leader as an individual, succession means a loss of power and, especially for the retired leader, a confrontation with personal mortality. Between the leader and the successor, there is a concrete transmission of energy, a process that requires time and trust. For the leader and the organization, finally, succession can imply a loss of identity and direction. Fear of mortality, the development of trust, and loss of identity are profound challenges that are facilitated by ensuring continuity (Korine, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Depending on how owners align and exercise their command, family businesses can be fragile or resilient. From the accomplishment of this research, it was possible to identify how management occurs in the succession process in family businesses concerning the succession process, professionalization, family conflicts, and decision-making.

Concerning the succession process, there was inadequate planning by the owners, a lack of professionals to expand knowledge on the subject, and the possibility of seeking executives to hold strategic positions in the company. As for professionalization, the interviewees invest in the education of their successors, creating the opportunity for their children to prepare through undergraduate courses and specializations. In relation to family conflicts, particular interests were perceived among family members and situations of resistance to change by the interviewees concerning the acceptance of new ideas, business or technology opportunities from successors. Moreover, unbalanced emotions affect decision-making. For this reason, separating the family relationship and making the organization more professional is necessary. Thus, there is the need to organize succession planning in a gradual and planned way to exchange power so that both successor and family are prepared for this transition.

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