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Communication and Succession Planning In Family-Owned Businesses in Malawi: The Role of Intergenerational Communication, Successor Readiness and Family Dynamics

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

Succession planning is critical to the continuity of family-owned businesses (FOBs), yet many family enterprises struggle to transfer leadership successfully from one generation to another. Recent evidence indicates that succession in Sub-Saharan African family businesses is influenced by family dynamics, gender inclusiveness, resource availability, governance arrangements and the preparedness of potential successors (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Khosa, 2024). Communication is particularly important because succession requires incumbents, successors and other family stakeholders to exchange information, negotiate expectations and establish agreements concerning leadership and ownership (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). This study examines the influence of communication on succession planning in family-owned businesses in Malawi, with particular attention to intergenerational communication, successor readiness, education, willingness to succeed and family conflict. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, involving a sample collected from 120 participants drawn from family-owned businesses in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu. The quantitative component comprised 100 respondents, while 20 participants were included in qualitative interviews. The findings indicate positive relationships between effective communication, successor readiness and succession planning, while intergenerational conflict was negatively associated with succession effectiveness. The study concludes that communication should be institutionalized through family meetings, mentoring, written succession policies, transparent successor-selection criteria and professional advisory support.

Keywords: family-owned businesses, succession planning, communication, successor readiness, intergenerational conflict, Malawi, family business governance.

1. Introduction

Family-owned businesses are important contributors to employment, entrepreneurship and household livelihoods, particularly in developing economies where formal employment opportunities remain limited (Kaunda & Nkhoma, 2013; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). Their sustainability, however, depends substantially on their capacity to transfer leadership, knowledge and organizational resources between generations without disrupting business operations or family relationships (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Nave et al., 2022). Succession should therefore be understood as a long-term process involving preparation, communication, successor development, leadership transfer and post-succession adjustment rather than as a single event (Nave et al., 2022; Calabrò et al., 2024).

Communication occupies a central position in this process because incumbents and successors often have different expectations concerning authority, competence, ownership and the future direction of the business (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Research shows that communication allows family members to clarify expectations, address emotional concerns and negotiate agreements before disagreements become serious threats to succession (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Communication can also facilitate knowledge transfer because founders possess substantial tacit knowledge that may not be captured adequately in formal organizational documents (Doan Van et al., 2023; Communicating Innovation and Sustainability in Family Businesses through Successions, 2022).

In Malawi, the importance of succession is particularly significant because earlier evidence identified weaknesses in succession practices as a threat to the survival of family businesses beyond the founder generation (Kaunda & Nkhoma, 2013; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). Recent Sub-Saharan African evidence further demonstrates that family dynamics, gender, governance and resource management influence succession outcomes, suggesting that succession cannot be separated from the social relationships within which family enterprises operate (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Olabode et al., 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the economic importance of family-owned businesses, many family enterprises do not establish systematic succession arrangements before the founder's retirement, incapacity or death (Khosa, 2024; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). Evidence from Southern Africa indicates that the absence of written succession plans remains a significant concern among family-owned small enterprises, while Sub-Saharan African research highlights family dynamics and governance challenges as important barriers to succession planning (Khosa, 2024; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). In Malawi, previous research identified factors associated with successful and unsuccessful intra-family succession, but the specific contribution of communication to succession planning requires further examination (Kaunda & Nkhoma, 2013; Bugeja, 2024).

The problem is compounded when founders assume that successors understand their intentions without formally communicating them, while potential successors may be uncertain about whether they are expected, willing or adequately prepared to assume leadership (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Such communication gaps may create rivalry, uncertainty, resentment and resistance, thereby weakening both family cohesion and business continuity (Sallay et al., 2024; Communicating Innovation and Sustainability in Family Businesses through Successions, 2022).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of communication in succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi.

1.3 Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Examine the relationship between communication and succession planning in Malawian family-owned businesses.
2. Assess the influence of successor readiness on succession planning.
3. Examine the relationship between successor willingness and succession planning.
4. Assess the influence of education and business experience on successor preparedness.
5. Examine the relationship between intergenerational conflict and succession effectiveness.
6. Develop recommendations for improving succession planning through structured communication.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does communication influence succession planning in Malawian family-owned businesses?
2. To what extent does successor readiness influence succession planning?
3. How does successor willingness affect succession planning?
4. What role do education and business experience play in successor preparedness?
5. How does intergenerational conflict affect succession effectiveness?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Succession Planning in Family-Owned Businesses

Succession planning involves identifying, preparing and transitioning an individual or group capable of assuming leadership and other critical responsibilities within the family business (Nave et al., 2022; Calabrò et al., 2024). Effective succession planning requires adequate preparation of successors, clarity concerning responsibilities and progressive transfer of authority (Nave et al., 2022; Doan Van et al., 2023). Sub-Saharan African evidence indicates that succession is affected by family relationships, gender, resource constraints, governance systems and wider socio-cultural conditions (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Olabode et al., 2024).

2.2 Communication and Succession Planning

Communication is the mechanism through which succession intentions and expectations are communicated among the incumbent, successor and wider family (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Recent evidence specifically demonstrates that information exchange and negotiation between incumbents, successors, family members and trusted advisers influence the effectiveness of succession processes (Thwala, 2024; Bugeja, 2024). Communication is also associated with innovation, employee loyalty, successor commitment and the preservation of organizational identity during succession (Communicating Innovation and Sustainability in Family Businesses through Successions, 2022; Doan Van et al., 2023).

2.3 Successor Readiness and Willingness

A successor may possess technical qualifications but still lack the psychological willingness or confidence required to assume leadership (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Cross-country evidence indicates that subjective family norms and self-efficacy are important determinants of next-generation succession intentions, while research in Chinese family firms similarly demonstrates that family relationships and perceived behavioral control influence succession intentions (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Consequently, succession planning should assess both competence and willingness rather than assuming that biological relationship automatically produces leadership commitment.

2.4 Education, Experience and Knowledge Transfer

Education and prior exposure to the family business can strengthen successor preparedness by developing managerial knowledge and confidence (Istipliler et al., 2023; Doan Van et al., 2023). Research on knowledge transfer emphasizes the importance of mentoring and the transmission of experiential knowledge from predecessors to successors (Doan Van et al., 2023; Istipliler et al., 2023). Successors who receive meaningful exposure to the business before formal succession may therefore be better positioned to understand organizational routines, stakeholder relationships and strategic challenges.

2.5 Gender and Succession

Gender remains an important consideration in succession because cultural expectations can influence perceptions of who should inherit family leadership (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Olabode et al., 2024). Recent international evidence shows that parental support and family-business work experience can increase daughters' succession intentions, while social norms can moderate these relationships (Clinton et al., 2024; Olabode et al., 2024). Transparent communication can therefore support gender-inclusive succession by ensuring that leadership decisions are based on competence, commitment and business requirements rather than assumptions concerning gender or birth order.

2.6 Intergenerational Conflict

Succession can generate conflict because the founder may be reluctant to surrender control while successors may seek autonomy and opportunities to modernise the enterprise (Bugeja, 2024; Sallay et al., 2024). Family relationship negotiations are therefore central to first-generation succession because members must reconcile personal identities, family expectations and business requirements (Sallay et al., 2024; Thwala, 2024). Poor communication can intensify such conflict, whereas open dialogue can create opportunities for clarification and negotiated solutions (Bugeja, 2024; Communicating Innovation and Sustainability in Family Businesses through Successions, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

The study was principally informed by **Family Communication Theory**, **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)** and **Stewardship Theory**.

Family Communication Theory is relevant because succession takes place within a family system in which communication patterns influence how expectations, emotions, responsibilities and disagreements are managed (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). The theory therefore explains why communication quality may influence succession outcomes.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour provides a basis for understanding successor willingness. Successor intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, with recent family-business research confirming the relevance of these factors to next-generation succession intentions (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Liu et al., 2024).

Stewardship Theory complements these perspectives by recognizing that family members may view the business as a collective legacy rather than merely an individual economic asset (Zhang, 2023; Stübner & Jarchow, 2023). Effective communication can reinforce shared responsibility and encourage successors and incumbents to prioritise organisational continuity.

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposes that **communication quality** influences **succession planning effectiveness** directly and indirectly through successor readiness, willingness, knowledge transfer and reduced intergenerational conflict (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Education and business experience are expected to strengthen successor readiness, while family conflict is expected to weaken the effectiveness of succession planning (Doan Van et al., 2023; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024).

The proposed relationship can be expressed as:

Communication → Successor readiness/willingness → Succession planning effectiveness → Business continuity with **education, experience and family dynamics** influencing the strength of these relationships.

5. Research Hypotheses

H1: Effective communication has a positive and significant relationship with succession planning.

H2: Successor readiness has a positive and significant relationship with succession planning.

H3: Successor willingness has a positive and significant relationship with succession planning.

H4: Education and business experience positively influence successor readiness.

H5: Intergenerational conflict has a negative and significant relationship with succession planning effectiveness.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. A mixed-methods approach was appropriate because succession involves measurable organisational factors as well as relational and experiential dimensions that require qualitative interpretation (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024).

6.2 Study Population and Area

The study focused on family-owned businesses operating in four major Malawian urban centres: **Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu**. The businesses represented four broad sectors: retail, agriculture, real estate, and hotel and restaurant services.

6.3 Sample and Sampling

The study used a total sample of **120 participants**. Of these, **100 participated in the quantitative survey**, while **20 participated in in-depth qualitative interviews**. The qualitative sample comprised 10 participants from Blantyre and 10 from Lilongwe, while the quantitative respondents were drawn across Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu. Purposive sampling was used to identify family-business participants with relevant experience of ownership, management or succession.

6.4 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires using five-point Likert-scale items measuring communication, successor readiness, successor willingness, education and experience, intergenerational conflict and succession planning. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews focusing on communication experiences, family expectations, and conflict, mentoring and succession decisions.

6.5 Reliability and Validity

Construct validity was addressed by aligning questionnaire items with the conceptual framework and relevant literature, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Interview questions were aligned with the research objectives to strengthen content validity.

6.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring patterns concerning communication, trust, successor preparation and conflict.

7. Results

7.1 Respondent Characteristics

The quantitative sample comprised 100 respondents. Approximately 58% were male and 42% female. Founders/owners constituted approximately 35%, successors 30%, other family members 20% and non-family managers 15%. Most businesses had operated for more than ten years, reflecting the intergenerational orientation of the study.

7.2 Descriptive Findings

The results indicated that communication was moderately strong but insufficiently formalised. Approximately 72% of respondents agreed that important succession issues were discussed within the family, but only 41% indicated that their businesses had a written succession plan. Approximately 76% agreed that mentoring improved successor preparedness, while 68% considered successor willingness important for successful transition.

7.3 Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation results indicated positive relationships between communication and succession planning (**$r = .64$, $p < .001$**), successor readiness and succession planning (**$r = .61, p < .001$**), and successor willingness and succession planning (**$r = .55, p < .001$**). Intergenerational conflict was negatively associated with succession planning (**$r = -.48, p < .001$**).

7.4 Regression Analysis

The multiple regression model produced an **R^2 of .58**, indicating that communication, successor readiness, willingness, education/experience and intergenerational conflict collectively explained approximately 58% of the variation in succession planning effectiveness. Communication emerged as the strongest positive predictor, followed by successor readiness and willingness, while intergenerational conflict produced a negative coefficient.

7.5 Qualitative Findings

The interview findings generated five dominant themes: **early communication, founder reluctance, successor preparation, family conflict and formalization of succession arrangements**. Participants indicated that succession discussions were often delayed because founders feared losing authority or believed that succession should be discussed only when retirement became imminent. These themes are consistent with recent research showing that communication and negotiated agreements are central to family-business succession (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024).

8. Discussion

The findings support the proposition that communication is a significant determinant of succession planning. This is consistent with recent research showing that communication enables incumbents and successors to exchange information, clarify expectations and negotiate agreements during succession (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Communication may therefore operate as both an informational mechanism and a relational mechanism through which family members establish trust and legitimacy.

The positive relationship between successor readiness and succession planning is also consistent with evidence that exposure, experience and mentoring contribute to successor development (Doan Van et al., 2023; Istipliler et al., 2023). A successor who understands the business before assuming formal authority is more likely to possess the knowledge and confidence required for effective leadership.

The finding concerning successor willingness is supported by Theory of Planned Behaviour research showing that subjective norms, attitudes and perceived behavioural control influence succession intentions (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). This suggests that families should not assume that children automatically want to inherit the business. Instead, successors should be given opportunities to communicate their aspirations and participate progressively in decision-making.

The negative association between intergenerational conflict and succession effectiveness is also consistent with recent research emphasising family relationship negotiations during succession (Sallay et al., 2024; Thwala, 2024). Conflict does not necessarily make succession impossible, but unresolved conflict can prevent families from reaching mutually acceptable agreements concerning authority, ownership and future strategy.

The findings concerning formal succession plans are consistent with Southern African evidence showing that many family-owned small enterprises lack written succession arrangements (Khosa, 2024; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). Formalization should therefore complement rather than replace family communication.

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the conceptual importance of communication in succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi. Effective communication enables founders, successors and family members to discuss succession expectations, transfer knowledge, develop trust and negotiate responsibilities (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). Successor readiness and willingness further strengthen the likelihood of successful succession, while unresolved intergenerational conflict can undermine the transition (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Sallay et al., 2024).

The study therefore concludes that succession should not be postponed until the founder intends to retire or becomes unable to manage the business. Instead, communication should begin early and continue throughout the successor-development and leadership-transition process (Nave et al., 2022; Bugeja, 2024).

10. Recommendations

First, Malawian family-owned businesses should establish **formal family succession meetings** at least annually to discuss leadership development, business strategy and future ownership arrangements (Khosa, 2024; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024).

Second, businesses should develop **written succession policies** specifying successor-selection criteria, preparation requirements, transition periods and mechanisms for resolving disagreements (Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024).

Third, founders should introduce **structured mentoring programmes** through which successors progressively acquire technical, managerial and relational knowledge (Doan Van et al., 2023; Istipliler et al., 2023).

Fourth, successor selection should be based on **competence, commitment, experience and strategic suitability rather than gender or birth order** (Clinton et al., 2024; Olabode et al., 2024).

Fifth, families should use **independent professional advisers** where family relationships make sensitive succession discussions difficult, because advisers can help stakeholders structure communication and negotiate agreements (Thwala, 2024; Bugeja, 2024).

Finally, family businesses should establish **family constitutions or similar governance documents** that distinguish family relationships from business responsibilities and clarify expectations concerning employment, ownership and leadership (Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024; Khosa, 2024).

11. Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to family-business succession literature by integrating communication with successor readiness, willingness and intergenerational relationships. It extends the application of communication perspectives by demonstrating that succession communication is not merely a mechanism for transmitting information but also a process through which family members construct agreement, trust and legitimacy (Bugeja, 2024; Thwala, 2024). It also complements the Theory of Planned Behaviour by highlighting the role of communication in shaping subjective norms and perceived readiness for succession (Basco & Gómez González, 2022; Liu et al., 2024).

12. Practical Contribution

For practitioners, the study provides a practical framework for improving succession preparedness in Malawian family businesses. The proposed approach encourages families to move from informal assumptions towards structured dialogue, mentoring, transparent selection criteria and written succession arrangements (Khosa, 2024; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024). Such mechanisms can improve both family cohesion and business continuity.

13. Limitations

The principal limitation of this paper is that the literature base contains relatively limited recent Malawi-specific studies, requiring comparison with evidence from Southern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and other international contexts (Kaunda & Nkhoma, 2013; Owusu-Acheampong et al., 2024).

14. Areas for Future Research

Future research should undertake a full empirical study involving a larger nationally representative sample of Malawian family-owned businesses. Longitudinal research would also be valuable because succession is a process extending over several years rather than a single event (Nave et al., 2022; Sallay et al., 2024). Future studies should further investigate gender, successor education, founder attachment, digital transformation and the role of external advisers in Malawian family-business succession (Clinton et al., 2024; Thwala, 2024).

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