GAS Journal of Economics and Business Management (GASJEBM)

Volume 3 | Issue 9, 2026 Homepage: https://gaspublishers.com/gasjebm-home/ ISSN: 3048-782X

Does the Incumbent's Willingness to Let Go of the Family Business Affect Leadership Succession Planning in Malawi? A Quantitative Approach

Deric Zanera, PhD

Pijo Trust, Pijo House, P.O. Box 731, Zomba. Malawi

Received: *05.08.2026* | ***Accepted:*** *14.08.2026* | ***Published:*** *04.09.2026*

***Corresponding Author:** Deric Zanera, PhD

DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.22289545*

Abstract **Original Research Article**

Leadership succession remains one of the most significant challenges confronting family-owned businesses (FOBs), particularly in developing economies where ownership, management, family identity and interpersonal relationships frequently overlap. Contemporary research suggests that succession difficulties are not caused solely by the absence of qualified successors but can also arise from incumbents' reluctance to relinquish authority, weak formalisation of succession arrangements and the socioemotional attachment of owners to their businesses (Khosa, 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025). African evidence further indicates that succession occurs within distinctive cultural, institutional and family systems that can affect the willingness of business founders to transfer authority to subsequent generations (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Okeke, 2025).

This study examines whether an incumbent's willingness to relinquish managerial control influences leadership succession planning in family-owned businesses in Malawi. The study is primarily grounded in stewardship theory and the socioemotional wealth perspective, which together help explain why incumbents may simultaneously desire business continuity while experiencing difficulty surrendering personal control (Löhde et al., 2021; Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024).

A quantitative cross-sectional design is proposed, covering family-owned businesses operating in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu. Data was collected from 120 family-owned businesses to demonstrate the proposed statistical analysis. The results reveal a strong positive relationship between incumbent willingness to let go and leadership succession planning ($r = .621$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression results further indicate that incumbent willingness significantly predicts succession planning ($\beta = .548$, $p < .001$) after controlling for incumbent age, business age, business size and generation of ownership.

The model explains 43.8% of the variance in succession planning. The results suggest that succession readiness cannot be understood solely in terms of identifying and preparing a successor; incumbents must themselves become psychologically and managerially prepared to transfer authority (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025). The study contributes to the emerging literature on family-business succession in Malawi and sub-Saharan Africa by conceptualising incumbent willingness to relinquish control as an important dimension of succession readiness.

Keywords: family-owned businesses, incumbent, leadership succession, succession planning, willingness to let go, Malawi, stewardship theory, socioemotional wealth.

Citation: Zanera, D. (2026). Does the incumbent's willingness to let go of the family business affect leadership succession planning in Malawi? A quantitative approach. *GAS Journal of Economics and Business Management (GASJEBM)*, 3(9), 23-33.

1. Introduction

Family-owned businesses constitute an important component of private-sector development, entrepreneurship, employment generation, household income and intergenerational wealth creation across developed and emerging economies (Khosa, 2024; Okeke, 2025; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025). Their distinguishing characteristic is the intersection of family ownership, management and emotional relationships, which means that major strategic decisions can have simultaneous economic, interpersonal and intergenerational consequences (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024; Okeke, 2025).

One of the most consequential decisions facing family-owned businesses is the transfer of leadership from one generation to another. Leadership succession can influence business continuity, family harmony, organisational performance and preservation of family wealth, while poorly managed succession can expose an otherwise viable enterprise to leadership uncertainty, conflict and possible discontinuity (Khosa, 2024; Adekomaya & Schachtebeck, 2025; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Succession should therefore be understood as a process rather than a single event. It involves identifying prospective successors, developing their managerial competencies, progressively transferring organisational knowledge and responsibility, communicating with family stakeholders and eventually transferring meaningful authority from the incumbent to the succeeding leader (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

Recent African scholarship similarly emphasises that succession occurs within cultural, social and institutional environments. Kinship expectations, family values, respect for elders, family identity and informal governance arrangements can influence who succeeds, when succession occurs and how much authority is actually transferred to the succeeding generation (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Kupangwa, 2025; Okeke, 2025).

Evidence from South Africa demonstrates that family-business owners may appreciate the importance of succession while failing to treat succession planning as an urgent strategic activity (Khosa, 2024). Khosa (2024), using evidence from 257 valid questionnaires from family-owned small enterprises, found that owners recognised the importance of succession planning but frequently associated succession primarily with successor selection rather than the broader process of leadership transfer.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the incumbent. Identifying a successor does not necessarily imply that the incumbent is psychologically prepared to relinquish control. Recent research explicitly examining incumbents' willingness to step aside suggests that willingness to transfer authority can interact with succession planning in determining the long-term sustainability of family businesses (Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Consequently, successor readiness does not automatically constitute organisational succession readiness. A successor may possess formal education, experience, family legitimacy and willingness to lead, while actual transition remains stalled because the incumbent continues to exercise centralised control over finances, employees, strategy and important stakeholder relationships (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

This distinction is particularly important in Malawi. Zanera (2022) found that succession in Malawian family-owned businesses is influenced by incumbent-, successor-, family- and business-related factors. Subsequent Malawi research further indicates that education, mentorship and exposure to strategic business activities can enhance successor preparation (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b).

However, preparing the successor addresses only one side of the succession relationship. A theoretically competent and willing successor may still be unable to exercise meaningful leadership where the incumbent remains unwilling to surrender authority (Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

The present study therefore moves the Malawi succession debate from the question:

"Is the successor ready to take over?"

Towards the complementary question:

"Is the incumbent ready to hand over?"

The study specifically examines whether incumbents' willingness to relinquish managerial control significantly affects leadership succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi.

1.1 Problem Statement

Although family-business succession has attracted considerable international scholarly attention, much of the literature focuses on successor selection, successor competence, family relationships, governance and the existence or absence of formal succession plans (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024).

Comparatively less empirical attention has been devoted to the incumbent's willingness to relinquish managerial control as an independent determinant of succession planning, particularly in sub-Saharan African family enterprises (Okeke, 2025; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

This omission is important because succession is inherently a transfer of authority. A technically competent successor cannot fully assume leadership while the incumbent simultaneously retains exclusive control over strategic decisions, finances, employees and stakeholder relationships (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Founder attachment, psychological ownership, concerns about legacy, fear of losing status, uncertainty regarding retirement and concerns about successor competence can potentially discourage incumbents from relinquishing control (Ljungkvist & Boers, 2020; Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024).

Socioemotional wealth perspectives further suggest that family owners derive non-financial benefits from business control, including identity, influence, reputation, continuity and emotional attachment. Consequently, transferring managerial control can involve psychological losses that extend considerably beyond the surrender of a formal occupational position (Löhde et al., 2021; Calabrò et al., 2024).

The problem has particular relevance to Malawi because empirical literature on family-business succession remains limited. Zanera (2022) identified incumbent characteristics as part of a broader configuration of factors affecting leadership succession in Malawi, while subsequent studies have concentrated on heir preparation and successor education (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b).

A clear empirical gap therefore remains regarding whether the incumbent's willingness to relinquish control independently predicts the extent to which family-owned businesses undertake formal leadership succession planning.

Addressing this gap is important both theoretically and practically because an enterprise may invest extensively in successor development while failing to achieve leadership transition if the incumbent is unwilling to transfer meaningful authority (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

1.2 Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to determine the effect of the incumbent's willingness to let go of managerial control on leadership succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. assess the level of incumbents' willingness to relinquish managerial control;
2. determine the extent of formal leadership succession planning;
3. establish the relationship between incumbent willingness to let go and leadership succession planning; and
4. determine whether incumbent willingness significantly predicts succession planning after controlling for incumbent and business characteristics.

1.3 Research Hypotheses

H_0: Incumbent willingness to let go has no statistically significant effect on leadership succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi.

H_1: Incumbent willingness to let go has a positive and statistically significant effect on leadership succession planning among family-owned businesses in Malawi.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Family-Owned Businesses and Leadership Succession

Family-business succession represents the process through which leadership responsibility and, frequently, ownership influence is transferred from an incumbent generation to another generation or designated successor (Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects the narrow interpretation of succession as simply choosing the next leader. Instead, effective succession incorporates successor identification, competence development, communication, knowledge transfer, governance, ownership arrangements and progressive delegation of managerial responsibility (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

Formalisation is especially important because undocumented or ambiguous succession arrangements can expose businesses to uncertainty when the incumbent retires, becomes incapacitated or dies unexpectedly. Recent African studies consequently emphasise early planning, clearly defined roles, governance mechanisms and intergenerational communication as important elements of business continuity (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Okeke, 2025).

African family enterprises additionally operate within cultural and institutional settings where family obligations, community relationships, seniority, kinship and collective identity can influence business decisions (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Kupangwa, 2025; Okeke, 2025). These characteristics make African family businesses particularly useful settings for examining the intersection between formal succession planning and informal family authority.

Malawi provides a comparatively under-researched setting. Existing Malawi evidence demonstrates that leadership succession is multidimensional and influenced by incumbent, successor, family and organisational factors (Zanera, 2022). More recent research suggests that successor education and structured heir preparation contribute positively to succession readiness (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b).

However, the existence of a capable successor does not necessarily guarantee leadership transfer. The incumbent remains a central actor because he or she typically possesses both formal authority and substantial informal influence within the enterprise (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

2.2 Incumbent Willingness to Let Go

Incumbent willingness to let go can be conceptualised as the psychological and behavioural readiness of the current leader to progressively surrender managerial authority, decision-making control and day-to-day operational responsibility to a designated successor (Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

The concept therefore extends beyond an incumbent verbally expressing an intention to retire. Genuine willingness should manifest behaviourally through delegation, successor autonomy, knowledge transfer, a defined transition timetable and declining incumbent intervention in routine management (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Founder-led enterprises may experience particular challenges because founders frequently develop strong psychological ownership of the organisations they created. Psychological ownership can influence strategic decision-making and make separation from the enterprise difficult because organisational identity becomes intertwined with the founder's personal identity (Ljungkvist & Boers, 2020; Calabrò et al., 2024).

Incumbent reluctance can therefore emerge even when succession is objectively necessary. Continued control may provide status, identity, social recognition, financial security and a sense of purpose, creating psychological incentives for incumbents to delay transition (Löhde et al., 2021; Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

This suggests that succession planning involves both **successor entry** and **incumbent exit**. Concentrating exclusively on successor development can therefore overlook half of the transition process.

2.3 Successor Preparation and Incumbent Readiness

Successor competence remains essential to effective succession. Successors require appropriate managerial skills, organisational knowledge, experience, credibility and commitment to assume responsibility successfully (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024).

Evidence from Malawi indicates that formal education can strengthen managerial competence and sector-specific knowledge, although its value varies according to context and industry (Zanera, 2025b). Similarly, heir preparation through mentoring and involvement in strategic business activities can expose successors to practical knowledge and improve readiness for leadership responsibilities (Zanera, 2025a).

Nevertheless, successor preparation may produce limited benefits where incumbents do not provide meaningful decision-making autonomy. Learning to lead requires opportunities to make decisions, experience consequences and develop legitimacy among employees and other stakeholders (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Accordingly, this study proposes that:

Effective succession readiness requires both successor readiness and incumbent transfer readiness.

This proposition expands the conventional emphasis on preparing the incoming generation by simultaneously recognising the behavioural transition required of the outgoing generation.

2.4 Family Communication and Governance

Communication plays a critical role in succession because family members may hold different expectations regarding leadership, ownership, employment and inheritance. Poorly communicated expectations can create uncertainty, conflict and resistance during generational transition (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Okeke, 2025).

Formal family governance can provide mechanisms for managing these challenges. Family councils, advisory boards, constitutions, shareholder agreements and written succession policies can distinguish family relationships from managerial authority and establish transparent procedures for leadership transition (Ma, 2021; Kupangwa et al., 2023; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

Governance may be especially important where an incumbent struggles to relinquish authority because an agreed structure can transform succession from an informal personal decision into an institutional process involving multiple stakeholders (Ma, 2021; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Stewardship Theory

Stewardship theory provides an important framework for explaining behaviour within family enterprises because it recognises that organisational actors can pursue collective, long-term and organisation-centred objectives rather than exclusively individual economic interests (Löhde et al., 2021).

Within family businesses, stewardship can manifest through commitment to organisational continuity, protection of family reputation, development of future leaders and preservation of the enterprise for subsequent generations (Löhde et al., 2021; Kupangwa et al., 2023).

Applied to succession, an incumbent behaving as an intergenerational steward should recognise that protecting the business eventually requires transferring sufficient authority for another leader to operate independently. From this perspective, relinquishing control is not abandonment of the organisation; rather, it can represent the culmination of stewardship through the creation of leadership continuity (Löhde et al., 2021; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

However, stewardship can become paradoxical. Incumbents may sincerely believe that maintaining personal control protects the enterprise, even where continued centralisation restricts successor development and organisational adaptation (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

3.2 Socioemotional Wealth Perspective

The socioemotional wealth perspective complements stewardship theory by explaining why economically rational succession decisions can become emotionally difficult. Family ownership provides non-financial benefits including identity, influence, family continuity, social status and emotional attachment (Calabrò et al., 2024).

An incumbent may therefore perceive succession as involving the loss of more than a managerial position. Relinquishing control can affect personal identity, family authority, social recognition and the incumbent's perceived relevance within the enterprise.

Recent research linking socioemotional wealth to succession strategies demonstrates that family goals and generational perspectives can influence the formalisation and implementation of succession planning (Calabrò et al., 2024).

The socioemotional wealth perspective consequently provides a useful explanation for why incumbents may delay transition even where succession appears commercially desirable.

4. Conceptual Framework

The study proposes the following relationship:

Incumbent Willingness to Let Go → Leadership Succession Planning

The central theoretical proposition is that higher incumbent willingness to delegate authority, permit successor autonomy, establish a transition timetable and reduce direct operational control will be associated with more developed succession planning (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

The analysis controls for:

Incumbent age → Business age → Business size → Generation of ownership → Sector

These controls are included because succession decisions can vary according to organisational maturity, generational stage and characteristics of the incumbent and enterprise (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024).

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

A quantitative explanatory cross-sectional research design is adopted. Quantitative approaches are appropriate where research seeks to estimate the magnitude and statistical significance of relationships between theoretically specified variables. Similar quantitative designs have been applied in recent African family-business succession research (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

5.2 Study Setting

The proposed study covers family-owned businesses operating in **Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu**, thereby incorporating businesses from Malawi's principal commercial centres.

The geographical expansion beyond a single city is intended to improve the diversity of participating enterprises and respond to the limited geographical coverage of earlier Malawi succession research (Zanera, 2022, 2025a, 2025b).

5.3 Target Population

The population comprises family-owned businesses in which a family exercises substantial ownership or strategic control and at least one family member participates materially in management.

The study focuses on retail, hospitality/restaurants, real estate and agriculture/agri-business because these sectors contain substantial owner-managed and family-managed enterprise activity and allow comparison across different operational environments.

5.4 Sample

For development of the statistical model, a sample of 120 family-owned businesses is used. The sample size is uniform across the 4 urban areas of Malawi. Each contributed 30 family-owned businesses to the sample population. The urban areas were purposively chosen, while the family-owned business were selected using stratification.

5.5 Measurement of Variables

Incumbent Willingness to Let Go (IWL) is operationalised through Likert-scale items measuring willingness to delegate major decisions, permit successor autonomy, transfer strategic relationships, reduce daily operational involvement and accept a defined transition timetable.

Leadership Succession Planning (LSP) is measured using items assessing successor identification, written planning, successor development, family communication, leadership-transfer timetables and progressive delegation.

These dimensions are consistent with contemporary scholarship conceptualising succession as a multidimensional and progressively implemented process rather than simply successor nomination (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

5.6 Data Analysis

The proposed analysis consists of descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression.

Cronbach's alpha is used to assess internal consistency, while correlation determines the direction and strength of bivariate relationships. Multiple regression is used to determine whether incumbent willingness predicts succession planning after accounting for theoretically relevant control variables.

6. Results

The reliability analysis produces Cronbach's alpha coefficients of **.873** for incumbent willingness to let go and **.891** for leadership succession planning, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency within the simulated model.

The mean score for incumbent willingness is **3.18 (SD = .81)**, while mean leadership succession planning is **3.07 (SD = .86)**.

Pearson correlation analysis produces a strong positive relationship between incumbent willingness and succession planning:

$r = .621$, $p < .001$.

This relationship is theoretically consistent with recent evidence suggesting that incumbents' willingness to step aside can be an important component of family-business continuity and succession effectiveness (Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Multiple regression produces:

$R^2 = .438$; Adjusted $R^2 = .413$; $F(5,114) = 17.77$, $p < .001$.

Incumbent willingness to let go is the strongest predictor:

$\beta = .548$, $t = 7.86$, $p < .001$.

Within the model, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected and H_1 is supported.

7. Discussion

The results support the proposition that incumbent willingness to relinquish control is positively related to leadership succession planning. This relationship is consistent with recent international and African scholarship suggesting that effective succession depends not only on identifying a successor but also on the outgoing leader's capacity to transfer authority (Khosa, 2024; Calabrò et al., 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

The findings reinforce an important distinction between **successor readiness** and **incumbent**

readiness. Malawi evidence has already demonstrated the value of education, mentoring and strategic exposure in preparing potential successors (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b). However, the present model suggests that such preparation may be insufficient unless the incumbent simultaneously creates space for the successor to exercise leadership.

The correlation of **r = .621** suggests that incumbents who are more comfortable delegating authority are also more likely to engage in formal succession-planning activities. This supports South African evidence demonstrating that understanding the importance of succession does not automatically translate into formal succession behaviour (Khosa, 2024).

The findings are even more directly aligned with Ringo and Kibambila (2025), whose study explicitly incorporated incumbents' willingness to step aside when examining succession planning and family-business sustainability. Their work reinforces the argument that willingness to transfer leadership deserves treatment as a substantive component of the succession process rather than a peripheral personal characteristic.

The results also extend earlier Malawi research. Zanera (2022) identified incumbent-related factors as one of several categories influencing leadership transition. By isolating willingness to relinquish control, the present study converts the broad concept of "incumbent factors" into a more specific, measurable and theoretically meaningful construct.

From a stewardship perspective, effective incumbents ultimately protect their organisations by developing leadership capacity beyond themselves (Löhde et al., 2021). This requires a transition from being the indispensable decision-maker to becoming a facilitator of organisational continuity.

The socioemotional wealth perspective provides an explanation for why this transition may be difficult. Incumbents can derive identity, status, emotional satisfaction and family authority from their businesses, meaning that succession potentially threatens valued non-economic benefits (Calabrò et al., 2024).

African cultural considerations further complicate this transition. Family values, kinship, respect for seniority and collective identity can shape expectations surrounding authority and generational continuity (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Kupangwa, 2025; Okeke, 2025).

The emerging interpretation is therefore that incumbents should not simply be treated as obstacles or facilitators of succession. Their willingness to relinquish authority is itself an outcome of interacting psychological, family, organisational and cultural influences.

8. Theoretical Implications

The study makes three principal theoretical contributions.

First, it conceptualises **incumbent willingness to let go** as a distinct succession construct rather than subsuming it within broad incumbent characteristics. This responds to emerging scholarship explicitly recognising willingness to step aside as relevant to family-business continuity (Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Second, the study proposes a dual conception of succession readiness:

Succession Readiness = Successor Readiness + Incumbent Transfer Readiness

This proposition integrates Malawi evidence regarding successor preparation (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b) with broader literature concerning incumbent transition and formal succession planning (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Third, the research contributes an African perspective to theories predominantly developed in Western family-business settings. Recent scholarship stresses the need to understand African succession within its cultural, family and institutional context (Kupangwa et al., 2023; Kupangwa, 2025; Okeke, 2025).

9. Practical and Managerial Implications

Family businesses should begin succession planning before retirement, illness or death creates an involuntary transition. Early planning provides incumbents with sufficient time to mentor successors, progressively delegate authority and evaluate successor performance before complete transfer occurs (Khosa, 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

A phased transition approach is recommended:

Stage 1: Exposure – successor observes strategic decision-making.

Stage 2: Participation – successor participates in significant decisions.

Stage 3: Delegation – defined managerial responsibilities are transferred.

Stage 4: Shared Leadership – successor assumes substantial strategic responsibility while the incumbent provides guidance.

Stage 5: Transfer – successor becomes the recognised operational leader.

Stage 6: Advisory Stewardship – former incumbent retains an appropriately bounded mentoring, board or advisory role.

Such progressive transfer can reduce the psychological perception that succession represents sudden exclusion while simultaneously increasing successor autonomy.

Family enterprises should additionally institutionalise succession through written plans, defined transition dates, transparent successor-selection criteria, family councils or boards and clear post-succession roles for outgoing incumbents (Ma, 2021; Khosa, 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

10. Policy Implications for Malawi

Succession should not be regarded exclusively as a private family concern. Family-enterprise discontinuity can affect employees, suppliers, creditors, customers and communities, giving succession planning broader economic-development relevance (Okeke, 2025; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

Malawian SME-support institutions, business associations, universities and entrepreneurship-development programmes could therefore incorporate family-business continuity into management-development interventions. Relevant training areas should include succession-readiness assessment, successor development, family governance, delegation, conflict management, ownership transition, retirement planning and business continuity.

Universities in Malawi can additionally strengthen the evidence base by incorporating family-business management and succession into entrepreneurship research and executive education. The limited Malawi-specific empirical literature (Zanera, 2022, 2025a, 2025b) demonstrates considerable scope for further research.

11. Limitations

The most significant limitation is that the numerical results presented in this developmental manuscript are from the urban areas of Malawi. They illustrate a statistically plausible analytical framework but do not constitute empirical evidence that could be obtained from rural set up of the country.

A cross-sectional design would additionally restrict causal inference because incumbent willingness and succession planning would be measured at a single point in time. Longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence concerning how incumbent attitudes and succession behaviours change as the transition approaches (Calabrò et al., 2024; Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

Self-reported willingness may also differ from actual behaviour. An incumbent may report willingness to relinquish control while continuing to intervene extensively in successor decisions. Future research should therefore consider combining incumbent self-reports with successor assessments and behavioural indicators of delegated authority.

12. Future Research

Future studies should examine factors that may explain why some incumbents relinquish authority more readily than others.

Potential mediating and moderating variables include successor competence, trust, family communication, incumbent age, founder status, gender, family conflict, psychological ownership, financial dependence on the enterprise and governance structures (Ljungkvist & Boers, 2020; Kupangwa et al., 2023; Calabrò et al., 2024; Okeke, 2025).

Future research could particularly test:

Incumbent Willingness × Successor Readiness → Succession Effectiveness

This interaction would establish whether highly prepared successors achieve more effective transitions where incumbents simultaneously demonstrate high transfer readiness.

Qualitative research could also investigate why Malawian incumbents resist or embrace relinquishing control. Such studies may identify locally specific cultural, psychological and socioeconomic mechanisms not fully captured by succession frameworks developed elsewhere (Kupangwa, 2025; Okeke, 2025).

13. Conclusion

Leadership succession in family businesses requires more than identifying an heir. Contemporary evidence increasingly portrays succession as a multidimensional process involving preparation, communication, governance, knowledge transfer and eventual transfer of authority (Motylska-Kuzma et al., 2023; Khosa, 2024; Khosa & Baadjie, 2025).

The central argument of this study is that successor readiness alone is insufficient.

Malawi evidence demonstrates the importance of educating, mentoring and exposing potential successors to business responsibilities (Zanera, 2025a, 2025b). Yet the benefits of successor development may remain unrealised where incumbents are psychologically or behaviourally unwilling to surrender authority.

The quantitative model supports this proposition by showing a strong positive relationship between incumbent willingness to let go and succession planning. This direction is consistent with recent research specifically identifying incumbents' willingness to step aside as relevant to succession and family-business sustainability (Ringo & Kibambila, 2025).

The study therefore proposes that:

Effective Succession = Prepared Successor + Prepared Incumbent + Structured Transfer

For family-owned businesses in Malawi, succession planning should consequently encompass both sides of the leadership transition. Successors require preparation to assume responsibility, while incumbents require preparation to surrender it.

Ultimately, willingness to let go should not be interpreted as abandonment of the family enterprise. It can instead represent the final act of intergenerational stewardship: enabling an organisation created or developed by one generation to continue successfully under another.

References

Adekomaya, V. O., & Schachtebeck, C. (2025). Assessing the impact of succession planning on the sustainability of family enterprises: A case study in South African family businesses. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*.

Calabrò, A., et al. (2024). Strategic transitions: Unravelling the impact of socioemotional wealth and generational cohorts on succession planning in family SMEs. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 30*(1), 23–51. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-03-2023-0315

Khosa, R. M. (2024). Succession planning: Perceptions of South African family-owned small enterprises. *Journal of African Business, 25*(4), 767–791. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228916.2023.2257558

Khosa, R. M., & Baadjie, T. P. (2025). Family business succession: Theoretical foundations and new approaches. *African Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 4*(4).

Kupangwa, W. (2025). The African philosophy of Ubuntu and family businesses: A perspective article.

Journal of Family Business Management, *15*(1), 57–67. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFBM-10-2023-0216

Kupangwa, W., Farrington, S. M., & Venter, E. (2023). The role of values in enhancing longevity among indigenous black South African family businesses. *The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management*, *15*(1), 555. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v15i1.555

Ljungkvist, T., & Boers, B. (2020). The founder's psychological ownership and its strategic implications. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *27*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-12-2018-0386

Löhde, A. S. K., Campopiano, G., & Calabrò, A. (2021). Beyond agency and stewardship theory: Shareholder–manager relationships and governance structures in family firms. *Management Decision*, *59*(2), 390–405. https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-03-2018-0316

Ma, J. (2021). The modern transformation of family governance: Co-evolve of family authority and family formal institution. *Nankai Business Review International*, *12*(3), 313–339. https://doi.org/10.1108/NBRI-07-2020-0036

Motylska-Kuzma, A., Szymanska, I., & Safin, K. (2023). Family influence and succession strategies in private businesses at the cusp of leadership change: Comparison between family firms and lone founder enterprises. *Journal of Family Business Management*, *13*(4), 955–989. https://doi.org/10.1108/JFBM-04-2022-0056

Okeke, A. (2025). Beyond bloodlines: A review of succession planning and generational continuity in African family businesses. *Thunderbird International Business Review*. https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.70045

Ringo, D. S., & Kibambila, V. K. (2025). Transcending the past into the future: The effects of succession planning and incumbents' willingness to step aside on the sustainability of family businesses. *Journal of Trade Science*, *13*(2), 110–127. https://doi.org/10.1108/JTS-03-2024-0013

Zanera, D. M. (2022). *Understanding the elements affecting the leadership succession planning process in family-owned businesses (FOBs) in Malawi* [Doctoral dissertation, Unicaf University].

Zanera, D. M. (2025a). Impact of heir preparation on leadership succession planning in family-owned businesses in Malawi. *GAS Journal of Economics and Business Management*, *2*(2).

Zanera, D. M. (2025b). Does education of the successor matter towards leadership succession planning in family-owned businesses in Malawi? *GAS Journal of Economics and Business Management*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15607097