Family business succession in dialogue: The case of differing backgrounds and views

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Ownership succession, when ownership is passed down from one generation to the next, is one of the most crucial issues for family business longevity. This study takes as its starting point the recognized need to better understand the role of communication during family business succession. Even though current research on succession has directed attention to the critical role communication plays in facilitating succession, it has mostly been implicitly addressed in relation to other issues such as trust, conflict, justice, and so on, and seldom as an issue in itself. In other words, communication has been studied as a means to an end, but not as an issue in itself. This has led to a situation where we know the importance of communication, but how it matters and how enriching it can be achieved, is often overlooked or oversimplified.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to develop a greater understanding of family business succession as a process taking place within emergent conversations where the focus is on the lived experience of the ‘doing’ of succession rather than the outcome of the process. The research is based on a real-time field study that took place during the 1.5 years when an owner family worked on their succession, mainly through family meetings. To flesh out the learnings of this longitudinal field study, Bakhtin’s work on dialogue, and in particular his notion of the ‘utterance’ is drawn upon.

By developing this processual approach, focusing on succession in the making, the study contributes to a greater understanding of how succession conversations unfold between family members in which three dimensions stand out as significant: the role of differences during conversations, the role of multi-voiced conversations, as well as the role of listening. What comes out clearly, when viewing these three dimensions together is the need for paying greater attention to the present moment during family
conversations since that is when ‘everything’ is happening: where people’s utterances emerge in an unpredictably yet dialogically shaped way, paving the way for dialogic transformation to emerge. During this moment a co-creation process take place in which succession issues can be dealt with through the interplay of voices.

An implication of recognizing the present moment during succession is the importance of allowing for an emergent communication process at this time because it is in the evolving way of relating to each other that the ‘previously not thought’ about can develop. From this point of view, the traditional stage models, with predefined steps to work through, that still inform succession planning need to be used with care and consideration for the impact they might have on the conversations. The problem with these models is that they build on predesigned steps and assume that family members should develop shared views. However, this way of working can impose monologic forces which can hinder the possibility for dialogic transformation to evolve. Taking into consideration that succession is a complex issue in which no predefined answers and alternatives can be sketched out, it is important to allow for a more incremental process to occur where everybody can draw on what they find the most necessary or useful at any particular moment.

In the future, more in-depth illustrations focusing on succession in the making, from different succession contexts and based on different theoretical frames would further our knowledge base on this significant area of research. We are convinced that such studies can form part of a new web of research aimed at promoting a better understanding of this complex issue that enterprising families continue to face.