

Beyond the Throne: Founder Role Reconfiguration in Family Business Leadership Transitions

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Abstract:

While much research has focused on how founders enter and build entrepreneurial ventures, relatively little is known about how they transition out of formal leadership- particularly in family businesses, where their withdrawal is often partial and layered. Founders rarely disengage fully; instead, they tend to maintain a presence that blends operational retreat with symbolic or strategic influence. This paper explores the redefinition of founder roles after leadership succession, focusing on the evolving nature of their engagement. Based on a qualitative multiple case study of six Moroccan family firms, the study identifies five distinct patterns of post-leadership founder influence: heritage-based influence, bi-generational collaboration, multi-generational leadership, fraternal delegation, and posthumous institutionalization. These trajectories reflect how founders shape firm direction through emotional legacy, advisory presence, or embedded values, long after ceding formal control. The findings show that their influence may persist through informal consultation, structured co-leadership, or institutional frameworks that codify their vision. This typology moves beyond binary classifications of active versus retired founders and offers a structured way to interpret the multiple paths founders can take to remain influential. It also emphasizes the role of socioemotional wealth in maintaining family continuity, guiding decision-making, and reinforcing intergenerational cohesion. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of founder disengagement and legacy preservation in family businesses, offering implications for theory and practice in succession planning and governance.

Keywords : Family business; Founder transitions; Post-succession influence; Role reconfiguration. Socioemotional wealth.

Classification JEL : L20, M10, D22

Paper type : Empirical Research

1. Introduction

The literature on entrepreneurship has extensively examined how founders initiate and shape their firms during early stages of creation and growth (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Burton et al., 2016; Casillas et al., 2011). Yet, the trajectory of founders after they relinquish formal leadership remains far less documented (Ahn, 2018). While significant attention has been paid to entry into entrepreneurship, the exit phase- particularly what follows after the succession moment - remains underexplored. This lack of attention is particularly striking in the context of family businesses (FB), where the departure of the founder seldom marks a definitive break. Instead, founders often retain a form of influence beyond their operational withdrawal.

In FB settings, founders' exits are rarely absolute. Instead of complete disengagement, these transitions often give rise to complex configurations of continued involvement, shaped by emotional attachment, symbolic legacy, and socioemotional wealth (SEW) preservation (Berrone et al., 2012; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2023, 2007). These dynamics are especially relevant to the "F" dimension of the FIBER framework- Family control and influence- which underscores the desire of founding members to maintain control over the firm's destiny, even in the absence of formal authority. Founders may shift into informal roles, acting as mentors, strategic advisors, or even moral compasses, creating a nuanced tension between withdrawal and continuity (Calabrò et al., 2018a). Such hybridity complicates the traditional binary succession narrative of "in" versus "out" and calls for a refined theoretical and empirical lens.

This paper aims to address this research gap by exploring how founders of family firms (FF) continue to exert influence after relinquishing formal leadership. Rather than assuming succession represents a terminal point (Calabrò et al., 2018a), we approach it as a reconfiguration process, wherein the founder adopts new forms of engagement. This investigation seeks to uncover the post-leadership roles and identities that founders assume, and how these roles are shaped by organizational size, generation structure, and ownership patterns. Our study is guided by the following research question: *How do founders in family businesses maintain or reshape their influence following the formal transfer of leadership?*

To answer this, we adopt a qualitative multiple case study design, focusing on six Moroccan FF of various sizes and generational stages. Morocco offers a particularly compelling context, where FF dominate the economic landscape, but succession processes often remain informal and imbued with strong cultural and relational norms. Despite this, there is a paucity of empirical research on founder transitions within Moroccan FF- especially concerning the post-leadership phase. By investigating this setting, our paper contributes both contextual richness and conceptual advancement to the literature on FF governance and leadership transitions (De Massis & Foss, 2018).

Methodologically, the study builds on semi-structured interviews with founders, successors, and family members, combined with thematic analysis (Nuzhat Naz, 2022). This empirical strategy allows us to identify a novel typology of post-leadership founder roles, categorized according to their nature and intensity. Through this lens, the paper not only sheds light on the invisible continuities of founder influence but also reveals how FF navigate governance, identity, and legacy in the long term.

In doing so, the study contributes to several streams of research. First, it enhances our understanding of succession as an ongoing negotiation rather than a punctual event. Second, it deepens the conceptualization of SEW-driven governance mechanisms, especially the 'F' dimension -family control and influence- by showing how founder identity can be institutionalized. Third, it enriches the contextual literature on FF in emerging economies, particularly in North Africa, where family logics intertwine with informal institutional norms. Finally, the typology proposed provides a practical tool for both researchers and practitioners seeking to understand the shifting configurations of power and influence in post-succession FB.

2. Literature review

2.1. The ‘F’ of FIBER: family influence through the lens of SEW

Family businesses are characterized by the profound and enduring influence that their founders seek to retain, often well beyond the formal handover of leadership (Chrisman & al., 2013; Chu, 2011; Martínez-Romero & al., 2020). This tendency is deeply rooted in the concept of SEW, as theorized by Gómez-Mejía & al., (2007), which refers to the non-financial aspects of the business that family members value -such as identity, legacy, emotional attachment, and, most centrally, control and influence.

The FIBER framework, developed by Berrone & al., (2012), breaks SEW down into five dimensions, among which the “F”-Family control and influence- is considered a cornerstone of both governance practices and strategic choices in FB (Fosse & al., 2025). This “F” dimension highlights how family members, especially founders, prioritize maintaining control as a way to preserve continuity and assert their identity across generations.

Unlike non-family entrepreneurs who may view exit as a rational economic decision, founders in FB often see the firm as an extension of themselves (Dyer Jr., 2006), and as such, control becomes deeply personal. This emotional investment often leads to behaviors that prioritize control retention over financial optimization (Gomez-Mejia & al., 2011), revealing a strong aversion to SEW loss -a loss perceived as more painful than economic underperformance (Basco & al., 2023; Gómez-Mejía & al., 2007).

To preserve this control, founders may implement governance structures -such as trusts, limited shareholding rights, or family councils- that institutionalize their influence after succession (De Massis & al., 2021). These mechanisms enable them to maintain not only formal authority but also symbolic and relational power, often exerted through mentorship, moral authority, or strategic guidance. This duality reinforces their presence within the firm while blurring the boundary between leadership and legacy.

However, such enduring influence does not come without tensions. As the firm transitions to a new generation, new expectations emerge regarding professionalization, innovation, and strategic repositioning (Ferrari, 2021). Founders may face identity renegotiation and role ambiguity (Ibarra, 1999), oscillating between operational disengagement and symbolic persistence. This friction is exacerbated when successors aim for autonomy, yet founders hesitate to let go fully (Ingram, 2011).

In the Moroccan context, these dynamics take on heightened complexity. FF often serve not only as economic entities but also as vehicles of social status, spiritual continuity, and intergenerational duty. The emotional ties between founder and firm are deeply embedded in cultural norms, religious values, and kinship obligations. Thus, founder influence is not merely a managerial or strategic concern—it is a moral and symbolic imperative. This context amplifies the relevance of exploring how SEW-driven control is preserved, transformed, or contested after succession (Makó et al., 2016).

Ultimately, capitalizing on the “F” of FIBER entails more than identifying formal ownership or board configurations. It requires a nuanced exploration of how emotional investments, legacy concerns, and identity attachments shape the continuity of influence. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to designing smoother succession processes, fostering generational collaboration, and avoiding relational breakdowns that could jeopardize firm longevity.

This paper contributes to the literature by unpacking how Moroccan FB founders navigate this emotional and symbolic transition. It responds to a gap in research that too often treats founder exits as binary events -present or absent, influential or disengaged- without capturing the lived complexities that occur in between.

2.2. Why post-leadership roles deserve closer attention: toward a deeper understanding

While founder influence in FB has received considerable academic attention, it is often conceptualized in binary terms: either as fully present or entirely relinquished after succession. Yet, numerous empirical studies underscore the persistence of founder influence well beyond formal leadership transitions (Calabrò et al., 2018a). Rather than disappearing from the organizational scene, founders often shift to less visible but equally impactful roles (Fang et al., 2021).

This tendency is particularly pronounced in FF, where control and identity are deeply interwoven. The concept of SEW (Berrone et al., 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007) explains why founders tend to maintain involvement: their emotional attachment, fear of SEW loss, and desire to preserve legacy reinforce a reluctance to fully disengage. Even after succession, founders may retain “invisible power” (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2011), using relational, symbolic, or cultural levers to shape decision-making.

These dynamics are further complicated by the ambiguous nature of founder status post-succession. As observed by Ibarra, (1999), identity transitions are rarely linear; individuals oscillate between roles, leading to uncertainty both for themselves and their successors. In the context of FB, such ambiguity may generate intergenerational tensions and undermine governance stability (De Massis & Foss, 2018; LeCounte, 2023). Despite this complexity, existing typologies often fail to capture the heterogeneity of post-leadership trajectories, reducing the founder’s evolving influence to overly simplified categories. Yet, recent calls in the literature emphasize the importance of moving beyond formal roles to analyze the informal, relational, and symbolic dimensions of influence.

This section thus argues for a renewed conceptual focus on post-leadership roles as a distinct and critical phase in the life cycle of FF. Rather than assuming a rupture between leadership exit and influence cessation, it invites a more refined understanding of how influence is reshaped, reconfigured, or institutionalized over time. Such an approach is essential for both academic clarity and managerial relevance, especially in contexts where founder presence continues to affect strategy, culture, and intergenerational dynamics.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multiple-case study design to explore how founders of FF reshape their roles and influence after stepping down from formal leadership. A qualitative approach is especially appropriate for addressing complex, underexplored phenomena where rich, contextual insights are necessary (Waldau, 2024). Following Eisenhardt's, (1989) logic for theory-building through case studies, and in line with recommendations by De Massis & Kotlar, (2014) for FB research, this methodology allows us to develop grounded insights into the post-leadership trajectories of founders.

3.1. Case selection and sampling

To address the research goals, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy aimed at capturing a diversity of founder post-leadership influence trajectories within Moroccan FB. The sample comprises six FF that had all experienced a formal leadership transition, ensuring that each case met the minimum requirement of a clear succession from the founder to a new leader, typically a second - or third-generation family member. This criterion was essential to allow an in-depth analysis of post-leadership engagement, as the founder had either fully or partially stepped back from formal authority.

The firms were intentionally selected to ensure theoretical replication across contrasting configurations, as recommended by (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Specifically, we sought heterogeneity across:

- *Firm size (small, medium, large),*
- *Ownership structure (single family vs. multiple family shareholders),*
- *Generational stage (second vs. third generation),*
- *Founder status (absent vs present).*

This variation allowed us to compare and contrast different manifestations of founder influence, and to identify recurrent patterns and distinctive configurations across cases.

All selected firms were 100% family-owned at the time of study and had undergone succession within the last two decades, providing contemporary insights into leadership reconfiguration dynamics in FBs :

Table 1: Overview of the empirical sample

Case	Firm Alias	Ownership	Leadership	Succession	Founder Status	Firm Size
1	Firm Legata	100% family-owned	Daughter-successor	Daughter (3rd generation)	Deceased	Small
2	Firm Aegis		Son-successor	Son (2nd generation)	Alive, informally consulted	SME
3	Firm Nexus		Son-successor	Son (2nd generation)	Retired, still strategic	SME
4	Firm Triversa		Son-successor	Son, Father, Grandson	Active within 2 generations	Large
5	Firm Solentia		Sons-successors	Five sons (2nd generation)	Alive, fully withdrawn	SME
6	Firm Altamira		Sons-successors	Two sons (2nd generation)	Deceased	Large

* For confidentiality purposes, the names of the companies have been anonymized. The aliases (Firm Alias) were purposefully chosen to reflect distinctive characteristics or values associated with each family firm, while preserving their anonymity.

This heterogeneity enhances analytical depth and facilitates pattern recognition across diverse FB contexts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through triangulated methods to enhance construct validity (Natow, 2020). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with founders, successors, and key family or non-family executives. In each case, interviews included both the founder (when alive) and the active successors, ensuring a multi-perspective understanding of the post-leadership dynamics. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Interview guides were informed by the theoretical framework and adapted iteratively as the data collection progressed (Nuzhat Naz, 2022).

Second, internal documents such as governance charters, family constitutions, strategic plans, and succession memos were examined to contextualize the verbal narratives. Third, non-participant observation was carried out during site visits to observe relational dynamics, symbolic artifacts, and workplace culture in action (Tannenbaum & Spradley, 1980).

3.3. Analytical strategy

A thematic analysis was employed using both within-case (horizontal) and cross-case (vertical) approaches (Swain, 2018). Within-case analysis enabled deep immersion in each firm's particularities, while cross-case analysis facilitated identification of recurring patterns and divergence (Miles & al., 2014). Coding followed an abductive logic, combining deductive codes drawn from SEW theory and role identity frameworks with inductively emergent themes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The analytical framework drew on four dimensions :

Table 2 : Analytical framework for exploring founder role reconfiguration in FB transitions

Dimension	Definition	Supporting References
Leadership Transition Stage	Founder's evolving positionality in the firm after succession (active, symbolic, withdrawn).	Calabrò & al., 2018, 2018; Ingram, 2011; Ward, 2011
Inherited Philosophies	Transmission and reinterpretation of founding values and guiding principles across generations.	Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Scotland, 2012; Zellweger & al., 2012
Family Involvement	Degree and nature of family participation in governance, ownership, and decision-making.	Ahmad & al., 2020; Chu, 2011; LeCounte, 2023; Lichtenthaler & Muethel, 2012
Post-Leadership Founder Role	A new analytical axis focusing on the symbolic, emotional, or advisory influence of founders after stepping down.	Chrisman & al., 2012; Davis & Harveston, 1998; Gómez-Mejía & al., 2007; LeCounte, 2023; Morris & al., 2010; Ward, 2011

To ensure credibility and transparency, coding reliability was assessed through inter-coder discussion between two independent analysts, and thick description was used to illustrate findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Cross-case patterns: common dynamics of founder influence

Despite formal transitions in leadership, founder influence remains a persistent and structuring force in these 6 FF. Across the varied cases analyzed-spanning differences in generation, size, and founder status-a shared set of patterns emerges. Rather than fading away post-succession, founder influence is often reconfigured, moving from formal authority to informal, symbolic, and relational dimensions that continue to shape strategic and cultural trajectories. One of the most pervasive dynamics observed is the symbolic centrality of the founder. Even in contexts where the founder is no longer involved in operational matters-or has passed away-he or she continues to embody the origin story, values, and moral compass of the business. Successors often refer to this presence not in functional terms, but as a deeply emotional and almost sacred reference point. This “emotional anchoring” reflects a broader dynamic where FB do not simply manage legacy; they live within it. The founder becomes a figure of continuity, often invoked when making critical decisions or navigating uncertainty. Such symbolic anchoring contributes to the firm's identity stability across generational shifts. Another salient commonality is the persistence of strategic consultation, whether implicit or explicit. Across cases, successors tend to either seek direct advice from the founder or reflect upon what the founder would have done in a given situation. This is particularly evident during key investment decisions, periods of crisis, or moments involving expansion and diversification. Even in cases where the founder is no longer present, his values and heuristics are often internalized and recalled as informal decision-making templates. These consultations are rarely institutionalized, taking place instead through rituals such as family meals or informal discussions, yet they carry strong symbolic weight. This leads to a third pattern: the transmission of inherited philosophies that function as informal governance mechanisms. These are not always codified in manuals or strategic plans but operate through implicit norms, expectations, and mental models passed down from one generation to the next. Founders often leave behind not only an operational structure but also a way of thinking-a certain posture toward risk, debt, client relationships, or long-term planning. Successors often refer to these inherited logics as a “philosophy of doing business,” acting as reference points that frame the firm's strategic scope and behavior. These inherited frameworks

are particularly vital in FB where identity and action are tightly coupled. A fourth recurring theme is the expression of family control through relational and symbolic channels rather than formal titles. Influence tends to be enacted not through hierarchical authority but through proximity, presence, and rituals. This may involve regular informal gatherings, the physical presence of the founder in the business premises, or even symbolic artifacts such as family portraits, commemorative plaques, or anecdotal storytelling that keep the founder's ethos alive. These mechanisms reinforce the idea that control in FF is not merely a legal or managerial matter, but a cultural one embedded in everyday interactions. Finally, across all firms, there is a pronounced sense of moral obligation to safeguard the founder's legacy. Successors do not see themselves solely as managers or entrepreneurs but as stewards entrusted with an inherited project. Their role is often framed as one of transmission rather than transformation, with a strong emphasis on preserving the emotional, reputational, and symbolic capital accumulated by previous generations. This stewardship logic tempers purely economic decision-making and anchors the firm in a long-term orientation, favoring legacy over short-term gain. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how founder influence—far from disappearing—undergoes a transformation that reflects the unique socio-emotional architecture of FF. It is in this evolving interplay between memory, symbolism, and strategic continuity that the enduring power of the founder truly resides.

4.2. Case-based typology of founder influence

▪ *Firm Legata : heritage-based influence*

Among the emerging typologies of founder influence, heritage-based influence represents a distinctive mode of post-succession control, rooted not in active decision-making or formal governance, but in symbolic continuity and affective transmission. This form of influence is particularly salient when the founder is no longer involved - whether by retirement or death—but their values, narratives, and legacy remain central to the identity and governance of the FF. In the case of Firm Legata, the founder's absence has not diminished their impact. On the contrary, the successor—a third-generation daughter—describes feeling bound by a form of inherited duty, referring to her role as one of memory stewardship. Leadership here becomes a custodial practice: the successor is not only running a business but also preserving and embodying a familial legacy. Decisions are often filtered through an internalized sense of “what the founder would have wanted,” even in the absence of any explicit strategic roadmap left behind.

This symbolic weight of the founder manifests in various ways: commemorative practices, implicit moral codes, storytelling rituals, and strategic reflexes anchored in past orientations. These elements collectively constitute a form of informal governance that continues to guide the successor's behavior and decision-making. The founder's presence thus persists through cultural, emotional, and symbolic capital (Zellweger et al., 2010; Bourdieu, 1991), exerting a kind of “invisible hand” over the firm's strategic evolution.

From a theoretical perspective, heritage-based influence maps closely onto the “F” dimension of the FIBER framework (Berrone et al., 2012), which emphasizes family control as a non-financial objective. It also reflects key insights from socioemotional wealth theory, particularly regarding the preservation of family identity and legacy as central motives in strategic choices (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). This form of influence reinforces the notion that in many FF, governance mechanisms extend far beyond legal ownership or executive roles—they are embedded in the very culture of the organization.

Importantly, heritage-based influence can be both enabling and constraining. On one hand, it provides the successor with a strong compass rooted in shared values and long-term purpose. On the other, it can create a form of symbolic pressure that limits innovation or fosters resistance

to change. The weight of “living up to” the founder’s legacy may foster path dependency, especially when strategic pivots challenge the perceived sacredness of inherited philosophies. Ultimately, heritage-based influence is a testament to the enduring power of founder identity—even in its absence. Rather than fading with time, the founder’s presence is reinterpreted, ritualized, and embedded in daily practices, shaping not only how the firm operates, but why it continues to exist.

▪ ***Firm Aegis : Tacit strategic influence***

Tacit strategic influence represents a subtle but enduring dynamic that emerges when founders withdraw from daily management while remaining informally present in the strategic life of the firm. This form of influence is neither codified nor institutionalized. Instead, it flows through affective bonds, shared understandings, and ritualized interactions between generations. It is especially visible during pivotal moments of decision-making, where the successor—despite holding formal authority—feels the need to align with or consult the founding figure.

In the case of Firm Aegis, this influence manifests through informal yet structured conversations between the successor and the founder. The son, now CEO, explicitly notes that he does not involve his father in routine operations. However, “*when it’s a major decision,*” he states, “*I consult with him first.*” These consultations often occur in intimate, familial settings—typically over dinner—highlighting the deeply relational character of this influence. This practice is not merely symbolic; it reflects a mechanism of continuity, allowing the successor to draw on the founder’s experience and perceived wisdom in times of uncertainty.

What makes this influence particularly distinctive is its dual nature: it is both absent and present. The founder is no longer involved in day-to-day management, yet remains a strategic reference point. This paradox creates a hybrid model of leadership, where formal authority lies with the new generation but legitimacy continues to be anchored in the family’s founding figure. The influence is exercised through memory, conversation, and emotional proximity rather than through hierarchical roles or legal status.

This dynamic also reinforces the intergenerational glue that binds the family to the business. Through this form of influence, successors maintain alignment with the founder’s values and vision, which in turn shapes the identity and strategic orientation of the firm. It offers a sense of reassurance and moral grounding without disrupting operational autonomy.

Nonetheless, tacit strategic influence may also generate tensions. The absence of clear boundaries between guidance and interference can blur decision-making lines. Furthermore, the reliance on informal communication risks leaving non-family stakeholders or external managers outside of the core decision loop, potentially challenging transparency and strategic agility.

Overall, tacit strategic influence highlights how founder authority can persist beyond formal structures, relying instead on relational continuity and emotional legitimacy. It is a form of influence that neither dominates nor disappears—it adapts.

▪ ***Firm Nexus : Bi-generational influence***

Bi-generational influence refers to a sustained strategic collaboration between the founding generation and its immediate successor. In this configuration, leadership is officially transferred to the next generation, but decision-making remains a co-constructed process. The founder, while formally retired, continues to act as a pivotal figure in shaping the firm’s strategic direction, particularly when it comes to core investment decisions and business trajectory.

Firm Nexus provides a strong illustration of this dynamic. Although the father has stepped back from operational responsibilities for over a decade, he maintains a strategic role—asserting, for instance, that “*I am the one who decides if we invest or not, or whether we should purchase something.*” Such statements reveal the continued assertiveness of the founder, not through day-

to-day interference, but as a co-architect of the firm's future. This ongoing involvement is not framed as resistance to succession but rather as a conscious effort to ensure that experience and historical perspective remain embedded in decision-making.

This model also offers successors the opportunity to lead with guidance rather than with solitude. The current CEO-the founder's son-assumes full operational control but does so with access to a trusted advisor whose insights remain integral to the business. What emerges is a form of co-leadership where authority is asymmetrical but influence is mutual. The successor brings contemporary managerial methods, while the founder contributes historical depth and relational capital built over decades.

Such an arrangement benefits from clarity and trust. The roles are complementary rather than competing. The successor acknowledges the founder's presence as an asset, while the founder accepts a more background position without fully letting go. This facilitates a smoother generational transition, reinforcing continuity while enabling innovation.

Moreover, the bi-generational structure serves as a cultural stabilizer. It ensures that the organization remains anchored in its familial identity, even as it evolves in response to market demands. Family values, business philosophies, and relational norms are gradually transmitted, allowing the firm to modernize without alienating its origins.

Nonetheless, this influence dynamic may present risks if not balanced properly. When influence veers into control, successors may feel constrained. Similarly, over-reliance on the founder may delay full empowerment of the new generation. But in the case of Firm Nexus, this balance appears managed, with both generations contributing distinctly to a shared strategic horizon.

Bi-generational influence is thus characterized by an intentional continuity, where succession does not signal a rupture but a collaboration. It is a transitional model where legacy and leadership are cohabited, rather than sequentially divided.

▪ ***Firm Triversa: Multi-generational influence***

In some FF, founder influence does not merely persist across a single transition-it expands through multiple generational layers, creating a form of triangular governance that reflects a complex, dynamic and often enriching interplay between age cohorts. This is the case in multi-generational influence structures, where the coexistence of three active generations shapes decision-making and embeds a long-term orientation in organizational behavior.

Firm Triversa offers a particularly illustrative example of this influence configuration. At the heart of its leadership structure lies a triadic relationship: the current CEO (second generation), his father (founding generation), and his son (third generation). These three voices-respectively representing strategic authority, legacy wisdom, and future orientation-operate in a system of negotiated consensus. The CEO situates himself "comfortably" between the voice of his father, "the wise one," and that of his son, "the young voice," emphasizing how intergenerational diversity becomes a resource rather than a source of conflict.

This triadic influence configuration ensures a rich calibration of decision-making. The father brings a perspective grounded in experience and continuity. The son (successor) anchors current operational control. The grandson introduces innovation and a sensitivity to emerging challenges. The result is a governance style that transcends generational silos, favoring depth over speed and continuity over disruption.

In such systems, influence is not about hierarchy or formality, but about legitimacy built on time, contributions, and symbolic roles. The founder's ongoing involvement, while not operational, carries authority that is rarely challenged. This is particularly visible during high-stakes decisions or strategic planning, where his input is both expected and valued. At the same time, the presence of a third generation injects agility and responsiveness, allowing the firm to navigate shifting markets while staying grounded in its founding identity.

Notably, the tri-generational setup does not rely on equal involvement across the board. Instead, influence is distributed according to function, legacy, and context. In Firm Triversa, while only the founder and his direct descendant are formally in leadership roles, the influence of the third generation is becoming increasingly visible. This gradual layering reinforces resilience and prepares the firm for continuity beyond the next transition.

Multi-generational influence also fosters a long-term strategic horizon. Firm Triversa, for instance, does not prioritize short-term profits. Instead, its core strategy revolves around “heritage building” and asset perpetuation—an orientation deeply rooted in family legacy. The presence of several generations within leadership reinforces this view, reducing the risk of short-termism and reinforcing a stewardship logic.

Crucially, the firm’s experience during crisis situations demonstrates another value of this structure: resilience. With multiple generations actively contributing to strategy and vision, decision-making is not only informed by a broad historical memory, but also adaptable through shared responsibility. The family’s collective commitment becomes a stabilizing force in uncertain times.

In essence, multi-generational influence is more than the continuation of founder control—it is a sophisticated organizational arrangement that embeds legacy, adaptation, and renewal in the everyday fabric of the firm. It stands as a powerful expression of continuity without rigidity, where the founder’s presence, far from being overshadowing, enables intergenerational dialogue and strategic depth.

▪ ***Firm Solentia : Delegated Fraternal Influence***

Among the diverse configurations of founder influence in FF, one notable pattern emerges when the founder voluntarily withdraws from all operational and strategic roles, transferring both formal authority and symbolic legitimacy to a sibling collective. This scenario, exemplified by Firm Solentia, represents what we define as *Delegated Fraternal Influence*—a mode of governance marked by full handover from the founding generation and a collegial, horizontal leadership exercised by a group of siblings.

In Solentia, the founder—still alive—has stepped aside entirely, allowing his five sons to jointly assume leadership. This deliberate withdrawal is neither a consequence of health nor a forced retirement, but rather a conscious act of transmission. The succession process, therefore, has culminated not in a single heir assuming control, but in a fraternal collective assuming stewardship of the business. This configuration redefines the locus of influence: it is no longer embodied in a singular patriarchal figure but diffused across sibling successors.

This form of governance introduces unique relational dynamics. Decision-making is shared, leadership is rotated or consensus-based, and legitimacy stems not from seniority alone but from the mutual recognition of competence and shared history. In Solentia, this collegial model fosters solidarity, but also requires careful coordination and alignment on values. The founder’s legacy is not channeled through a specific successor but lives on through an inherited managerial ethos cultivated within the sibling group.

One of the key aspects of *Delegated Fraternal Influence* is the absence of active founder presence—physically or symbolically. Unlike firms where the founder remains a consultative figure or a revered symbolic anchor, here the patriarch has accepted invisibility in operational life. However, his influence persists in a latent form: the cohesion of the sibling group, their shared leadership code, and the family norms that guide their governance are all indirectly shaped by the founder’s earlier efforts to instill unity and prepare them for collective action.

This configuration also reflects a particular interpretation of family continuity: it is less about lineage in the vertical sense and more about horizontal collaboration among peers. It assumes that harmony and cohesion among siblings can act as a stabilizing substitute for central leadership. This stands in contrast to more hierarchical or legacy-centered forms of founder

influence and reflects an advanced level of trust in the successors' ability to preserve the founder's vision while adapting to contemporary managerial demands.

Furthermore, this model implies a shift in the psychological contract between generations. The founder of Solentia has signaled that his role is complete-his mission was to create, consolidate, and prepare, not to hover or control. This act of stepping back serves as a final, empowering gesture: transferring not only the firm's command but also the symbolic weight of its future.

Yet, the success of such a model depends heavily on the quality of intra-sibling relationships, the existence of governance mechanisms (e.g., family councils, clear decision rules), and the ability to resolve conflicts without a central arbitration figure. In Solentia's case, the fraternal governance has worked effectively so far, suggesting a deep-rooted alignment in values and goals among the brothers-a latent echo of the founder's early shaping efforts.

In sum, *Delegated Fraternal Influence* represents a distinct post-founder configuration: one where the founder exercises influence precisely by relinquishing it. In doing so, he enables a new form of stewardship-horizontal, collaborative, and inherently collective-to emerge and thrive.

▪ ***Firm Altamira : Posthumous Legacy Influence***

Among the typologies of founder influence emerging from our study, the case of Firm Altamira presents a unique configuration: the enduring impact of a founder whose physical presence has ceased but whose ideological imprint remains deeply embedded in the firm's post-succession trajectory. We refer to this form as Posthumous Legacy Influence, which describes how founder values, strategic orientations, and symbolic authority continue to shape decision-making and organizational identity even after their death.

In Altamira, a large family-owned enterprise, the founder passed away before the transition of leadership to his two sons. Unlike other cases where the founder remains informally involved or retreats gradually, this case is marked by an abrupt succession underpinned by a strong emotional and symbolic continuity. The successors, while holding full operational control, consistently invoke the founder's principles as guiding frames in navigating strategic choices. References to "*what father would have done*" are frequent and serve not merely as rhetorical tools but as normative anchors in everyday governance.

This form of influence is not exercised through direct consultation or presence but is mediated through organizational memory, stories, routines, and often, physical symbols. Offices, meeting rooms, or annual rituals may serve as tangible reminders of the founder's ethos. More importantly, the business philosophy instilled by the founder continues to inform corporate culture, long-term vision, and intergenerational commitments. In Altamira, this is visible in the sons' commitment to preserve the founder's conservative investment logic, his community engagement practices, and his ideal of long-term stewardship over short-term profitability.

Posthumous Legacy Influence relies heavily on what could be termed "institutionalized memory." That is, the founder's values are not only privately held by the heirs but have been embedded into routines, organizational structures, and collective representations. This institutionalization makes the founder's absence paradoxically productive-it empowers successors with a moral compass while limiting deviation from the founder's vision.

Moreover, this type of influence raises critical questions about identity and autonomy in the post-founder era. Successors often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between honoring the founder's legacy and asserting their own managerial vision. In Altamira, the dual leadership of the two sons' functions as a safeguard against unilateral reinterpretations of the founder's philosophy. Their shared custodianship enables checks and balances, while also reinforcing the collective duty to uphold the founder's symbolic authority.

Yet, the weight of a posthumous legacy may also constrain innovation or delay necessary organizational changes. The reverence toward the founder can lead to implicit path dependency,

especially in larger firms where traditions are more codified. In Altamira's case, however, the size and maturity of the firm seem to have facilitated a stable equilibrium where founder influence fosters continuity without stifling professionalization.

In conclusion, Posthumous Legacy Influence is a powerful but subtle form of founder control. It does not rely on voice or presence but on memory, normativity, and a deep-seated respect for the founder's worldview. In such configurations, the founder remains a central-albeit silent-figure in the strategic and emotional life of the firm.

4.3. Categorizing founder influence through firm size: patterns and explanations

A closer examination of the six cases reveals that founder influence after succession does not follow a uniform path. Instead, it takes on distinct configurations depending on several factors, notably the size of the firm, the governance architecture, and the family dynamics at play. To capture this diversity, we propose a typology of founder influence categorized into three major forms: Embodied Relational Influence, Symbolic Heritage Influence, *and* Institutionalized Strategic Influence.

The first category, Embodied Relational Influence, emerges predominantly in small and medium-sized firms where relational closeness allows founders to maintain an informal yet meaningful presence in decision-making. In firms like *Aegis*, *Nexus*, and *Solentia*, this influence is enacted through everyday rituals, strategic consultations, or shared leadership among siblings. These firms exhibit a strong interpersonal dynamic where trust and emotional bonds replace formal governance tools, and influence is transmitted relationally rather than structurally.

"Even if I'm no longer in the meetings, they call me every two or three days to ask what I think."
Aegis's founder

The second category, Symbolic Heritage Influence, is exemplified by *Legata*. In this small, third-generation firm, the founder's presence endures primarily through the symbolic weight of memory and legacy. Although the founder is no longer operationally involved, her influence permeates the company's identity and decision-making ethos. This category is marked by the emotional anchoring of successors and a governance logic driven by intergenerational storytelling and cultural continuity.

"For every major decision, we ask ourselves what she would have done." *Legata's successor*

The third category, Institutionalized Strategic Influence, is more typical of larger firms like *Triversa* and *Altamira*. In these organizations, the founder's vision is preserved through formal mechanisms-either through strategic roles that remain with elder family members or through posthumous alignment with embedded values and long-term plans. This form of influence is less dependent on direct interaction and more reliant on institutional memory, codified beliefs, and shared philosophies passed through governance bodies or family councils.

"His mindset is embedded in the rules [...]" *Altamira's successor*

To summarize the typology :

Table 3 : Classification of case studies by categories of founder role reconfiguration in FF

Category	Firms	Key Features
Embodied Relational Influence	Aegis, Nexus, Solentia	Informal, active influence, relational proximity
Symbolic Heritage Influence	Legata	Legacy-based, emotional anchoring
Institutionalized Strategic Influence	Triversa, Altamira	Formalized, codified values, generational span

This categorization sheds light on the diverse ways founder influence continues to shape FF beyond the mere question of physical presence. It helps explain how these businesses manage leadership succession while holding onto core values and ensuring continuity-each form of

influence reflecting both the internal dynamics of the firm and the broader sociocultural context in which it operates.

5. Discussion

The findings from our multiple case study confirm a still under-theorized idea: founder transitions in family businesses do not follow the conventional logics of entrepreneurial exit. While traditional entrepreneurship literature conceptualizes exit as a clear break- typically through mechanisms such as sale, merger, or liquidation (Chirico & al., 2020) - our empirical data reveal a different dynamic in family contexts: one of enduring, reconfigured, and often symbolically reinforced presence.

This post-leadership continuity lies at the heart of identity concerns addressed in the SEW literature. As Gómez-Mejía & al., (2007) and Berrone & al., (2012) argue, the "F" dimension of the FIBER model- referring to family control and influence- emerges as a key intangible asset that founders seek to preserve well beyond their formal leadership role. Our findings show that such influence is not only exercised through explicit interventions but also through more subtle mechanisms: organizational memory, transmission of implicit philosophies, symbolic anchoring, and affective continuity (Calabrò & al., 2018; Davis & Harveston, 1998; LeCounte, 2023). These observations echo De Massis & Foss, (2018) emphasis on founder disengagement as a form of “identity work” requiring the redefinition of both role and status.

The typologies identified in our study also suggest that founder influence varies depending on organizational and generational configurations. The case of heritage-based influence (Firm Legata) vividly illustrates the preservation of a strong symbolic legacy, wherein the founder becomes a moral figure of reference, continuously invoked in decision-making despite physical absence. This form of influence aligns with what Miller & Le Breton-Miller, (2005) describe as “legacy leadership,” where continuity of the founding vision takes precedence.

Other cases, such as tacit strategic influence (Firm Aegis) or bi-generational influence (Firm Nexus), demonstrate how founders continue to shape strategic decisions through ritualized exchanges or implicit co-governance. These practices point to a hybrid governance model in which formal authority may be relinquished, but symbolic or consultative influence remains active. This supports Lu & al., (2022) observations on the difficulty of drawing a clear line between retirement and continued involvement.

Broadening the lens, our typology also reveals a process of institutionalization of founder influence in large FF (Firm Triversa, Firm Altamira), manifested through routines, family institutions, or narrative frameworks. This phenomenon illustrates the concept of “organizational memory” (Humphrey & al., 2021), which allows for intergenerational consistency without requiring the founder’s ongoing presence. In such cases, influence is no longer relational but structured- legitimized through artifacts, family charters, or inherited governance structures. These institutionalized forms reflect Sharma & al., (2003) view on how founders shape governance systems to ensure posthumous continuity of their vision.

Finally, the configurations of delegated fraternal influence (Firm Solentia) and posthumous legacy influence (Firm Altamira) challenge the very nature of founder power: it can be exercised through voluntary withdrawal or memorial presence. These cases show that a founder’s symbolic power can outlive their physical involvement, as long as it is deeply embedded in the firm’s culture and structure. This supports Dyer & Whetten's, (2006) assertion that the FF acts as an “extension of self” for the founder- a form of identity continuity that persists beyond their lifetime.

These results contribute significantly to the literature on entrepreneurial transitions. In line with diverse works, they expand our understanding of entrepreneurial careers by highlighting that the founder’s post-leadership engagement -often non-executive, symbolic, or advisory- is far

from marginal. On the contrary, in family contexts, this type of transition appears to be an implicit norm, shaped by SEW logics, emotional legacies, and strategies of continuity. Our study therefore calls for a revision of entrepreneurial exit models within FF. Far from a binary logic of presence versus absence, or power versus retreat, our findings reveal the existence of hybrid trajectories, in which influence is recomposed, adapted, and ritualized. This invites a re-theorization of entrepreneurial exit as a process of long-term identity and strategic reconfiguration- an idea that can meaningfully enrich debates on intergenerational governance and FF sustainability.

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the evolving literature on family business succession by shedding light on a relatively underexplored phenomenon: how founders reshape their engagement after transferring formal leadership. Drawing from six in-depth Moroccan case studies, we revisit the dominant narrative that succession marks a clear rupture in founder influence. Instead, our findings reveal that founders often remain embedded in the firm's decision-making, values, and symbolic architecture-even in cases of physical or formal withdrawal.

We propose a new typology of post-leadership founder transitions, capturing five distinct patterns of influence : patrimonial, tacit strategic, bi-generational, multi-generational, and delegated fraternal, along with a posthumous legacy mode. These configurations demonstrate that founders' exits are rarely absolute; they unfold along a continuum, shaped by firm size, generational dynamics, and the family's socio-cultural fabric. In particular, we observe that smaller firms tend to maintain symbolic or tacit founder influence, while larger firms institutionalize intergenerational collaboration or codified legacies.

This typology reframes the founder's role not as binary-present or absent-but as hybrid and evolving. It advances our understanding of how SEW concerns extend beyond leadership succession into long-term influence preservation, identity continuity, and shared governance. By doing so, the study opens new avenues for research on founder disengagement, intergenerational cohabitation, and the informal architectures through which legacy endures. Ultimately, this work invites scholars and practitioners to view succession not as a termination of leadership, but as a transformation of it-where influence persists, albeit in new and often subtle forms.

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