Conflict in Family Firms: Contributors and Reduction Mechanisms

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Family businesses are characterized by conflict. The most harmful type of conflict, relationship conflict, can significantly impair the operation of the family business, affecting not only daily operations but also its long-term effectiveness. This qualitative study focuses on the factors within family firms that contribute to conflict and those that help mitigate it. Drawing on the literature on family business conflict, succession, and commitment, we interviewed 50 family business owners and managers and analyzed the effects of conflict and the efforts to mitigate it. We extend the family business literature and advise practitioners by developing a model and six propositions.

Keywords: family business, family firms, conflict, succession, commitment, conflict resolution, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is common in family firms and is a natural result when two or more family members work together in a business. It serves as a reminder that even the closest families differ in their perspectives. Family firms provide fertile ground for conflict (Harvey & Evans, 1994) and experience relationship problems (Nose et al., 2017). Because of the entwined nature of the family and the business, family firms are even more prone to conflict than other forms of business governance (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2007). The presence of family adds another dimension of complexity to conflict beyond that of nonfamily firms because families bring a host of pre-existing relationships to the family business (Sorenson, 1999). Maintaining family relationships may sometimes supersede business success. Family business leaders must accommodate immediate family members and, in many cases, extended family members, who play roles such as owners, board members, managers, and employees. Family members are emotionally close to each other and have long-term relationships that extend beyond the family business (Alderson, 2015). Family issues may overshadow business concerns such as primogeniture, equal treatment of family members, work-family conflict, and succession (Nose et al., 2017).

Researchers report that practically all families experience relationship issues (Carlock & Ward, 2001). For example, children may want to be perceived as distinct from their parents, marital disagreements may arise, and sibling rivalry may readily spill over into family businesses (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007). Furthermore, leaders may desire to hide family conflict issues in some family firms. In their zeal to protect the family name, family business leaders may follow a path of avoidance, denying the existence of conflict or avoiding discussions of relationship issues within the family and with outsiders. When they do address conflict issues, family business leaders often prefer to handle them internally, rather than involving the public or outsiders. Although avoidance limits face-to-face clashes, this tactic may exacerbate the problems and spill over into other aspects of the family firm, reducing organizational effectiveness (Alderson, 2015).

However, family leaders ultimately must find ways to handle conflict to maintain the continuity of the family firm through the succession process and beyond. Succession remains a crucial topic for research and practice in family businesses due to its inescapable connection to family firm survival (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). Studies have shown a 30% success rate since transition to the next generation is essential but often treacherous for the continuity of family businesses. There is a glaring gap between the expressed desire of family business owners for internal succession (62%) and the attainment of that goal (30%) (Lansberg, 1988; U.S. Family Business Survey, 2019).

Due to the desire for privacy, family business leaders tend to be reticent about discussing their conflict management strategy. Sorenson (1999) proposed that family leaders resolve conflict following established norms within the family, which, in turn, carry over to the family business. Although a growing body of literature exists on conflict in family businesses, studies have focused on either an explication of conflict issues or the definition of strategies to combat conflict, studying the two in isolation. In their review article, Qiu and Freel (2020) call for studies to examine both family-related conflict and conflict management. Therefore, this study considers the following research questions: 1) Which factors contribute to conflict in family firms, and how do they do so? 2) How can family business leaders and successors reduce the dysfunctional conflict in their companies?

To address these questions, we interviewed 50 family business managers and owners, focusing on their experiences handling conflict within their respective family firms by identifying the factors that contributed to conflict and measures that reduced family business conflict. Our study makes three substantial contributions to the family firm literature. First, we extend family business conflict theory by taking a holistic view of conflict as it resides within and between generations in the succession process and beyond. Second, we examine actions that incumbent family business leaders may take to reduce conflict within their family firms. Third, we provide suggested avenues for successors to reduce conflict, not solely relying on incumbent leaders.

CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

First, we offer some definitions of key factors in this study. Researchers have characterized a family firm as a company in which one family, or a small number of families, owns and manages the business, with the values and beliefs of the families guiding the firm's actions (Chua et al., 1999). In alignment with conflict theory, we can broadly define conflict as a communicative process characterized by incompatibility, disagreement, or differences within or between individuals (Rahim, 2010; Qiu & Freel, 2020). Succession is an interactive process that involves transmitting ownership and management to the next generation in a family firm (Cadieux et al., 2002).

Next, we emphasize current theory in four areas that are key elements of our family business study: (1) types of conflict in organizations, (2) types of conflict in family firms, (3) family firm succession issues, (4) tactics and strategies to reduce behavior leading to conflict in family firms, and (5) family firm commitment as a counterbalance to conflict. We briefly examine these areas to provide conceptual grounding for this study.

Types of Conflict in Organizations

Most researchers recognize three basic types of conflict in organizations: task conflict, process conflict, and relationship conflict (Alderson, 2015: Caputo, Pellegrini, & Rialti, 2018; Jehn, 1995; and Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004). Task and process conflict may have some beneficial consequences for organizations. Task conflict concerns organizational ends or goals and the strategies that must be used to achieve those goals (Alderson, 2015). It focuses on differences in opinion regarding the activities that need to be accomplished within organizations. Group members better understand imminent tasks through discussions, improving decision-making and productivity (Jehn, 1995). Process conflict is focused on how work should be accomplished, including the proper allocation of human resources and the division of responsibility. Process conflict often impacts questions of what and how much personnel and resources to use in a given situation (Alderson, 2015). However, relationship conflict has predominantly negative effects on businesses. Scholars define relationship conflict as “an awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities [that] includes affective components such as feeling tension and friction” (Jehn & Mannix, 2001, p. 238). Relationship conflict involves personal animosities and incompatibility (Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Types of Conflict in Family Firms

As in all organizations, task and process conflicts are present in family firms; however, relationship conflict is prevalent in family firms and may have disastrous consequences (Dyer, 1986; Rousseau, Kellermanns, Zellweger, & Beck, 2018). Relationship conflict, characterized by anger, resentment, and worry, can result in severe productivity losses in family businesses (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004). Furthermore, Bettinelli et al. (2022) defined family conflict as issues that emerge within the family, involving engaged family members of all generations, incumbent and successor. Usually, family conflict corresponds to relationship conflict, as defined by Jehn and Mannix (2001). In a recent study, Mismetti et al. (2025) described the circumstances of family business conflict, including the who, what, where, why, when, and how. The “who” included dyadic, intergroup, and intergroup (managers – employees, majority and minority stockholders) conflict. The “what” refers to the types of conflict: relationship, task, and process. The “where” included the loci of conflict: family, generational, board/top management team, and organizational. The “why” examined the motivation for the roots of conflict, often deep in the family’s past. Finally, the “when and how” explained that conflict is not static and changes over time.

Within the overall concept of family conflict, researchers have identified several sub-areas, including succession conflict, generational conflict, family organizational conflict, board/TMT conflict, and role conflict (Bettinelli et al., 2022; Davis & Harveston, 2001). Succession conflict focuses on issues within the process of family business succession, such as differences between incumbents and successors regarding timing, training, responsibilities, division of labor, and the pecking order of multiple successors (Cater, Kidwell, & Camp, 2016). Although succession conflict encompasses many disagreements between generations, researchers also use the term generational conflict. Generational conflict occurs between generations, such as between parents and children, or within a generation, such as between siblings or cousins. Generational conflict may endure beyond succession. For example, Davis and Harveston (1999) described the generational shadow of the founder. Here, the predecessor continues to influence the family business even after the next generation has taken control. This finding led Davis and Harveston (1999) to propose that conflict within family firms grows stronger from the first to the second generation and beyond. Logically, as succeeding generations and more individuals become involved in leadership and express their opinions and family wealth increases, conflict may grow (Alderson, 2015; Davis & Harveston, 1999). Family organizational conflict refers to disagreements at the organizational level within the family firm, primarily observed among family firm employees. Board/TMT conflict refers to differences of opinion within groups such as top management teams or boards of directors in family firms (Bettinelli et al., 2022). Finally, role conflict may occur in family businesses when family members engage with the family in both their business and personal lives, often blurring the boundaries between the two (Davis & Harveston, 2001). Role conflict, also known as work-family conflict, can strain family business leaders’ physical and psychological health, adversely affecting their family life and business career (Carr & Hmieleski, 2015).

Family Business Succession

Another factor that may increase stress and conflict in family firms is change. Family leaders must handle change effectively because change is constant in family firms (Harvey & Evans, 1994). As a significant form of change, succession is a crucial factor in the survival of family businesses to an even greater degree than in publicly held corporations (Morris, Williams, Allen, & Avila, 1997). Generations in family firms (20 years plus) last longer than executive tenure in public corporations. In family firms, the process of succession usually takes place over extended periods (20 to 25 years) (Barach & Gantisky, 1995) and features the incumbent family leader(s) and the next generation of successor(s) (Cater et al., 2016). In family firms, succession involves transferring management and ownership from generation to generation, requiring a process of mutual role adjustment between the entrepreneur and next-generation family member(s) (Handler, 1990).

Research indicates that the successor must be fully committed to the succession process and willing to take over the leadership of the firm (Barach & Gantisky, 1995) and that the successor must demonstrate the necessary skills, performance, and experience for leading the firm (Barach et al., 1988). For the successor, Cabrera-Suarez (2005) found that two critical elements for a successful succession were training for leadership and commitment to the company. Furthermore, high-quality relationships between incumbents and successors lead to a successful succession by developing trust, mutual respect, early affiliation with the business, and mentoring (Kandade et al., 2021). The incumbent should provide a thorough training regimen for the successor to acquire firm-specific knowledge and develop his/her capabilities (Morris et al., 1997). Incumbents should expose successors at a young age to the family business and encourage the successor to acquire knowledge about the people and processes involved (Ward, 1987). Training and mentoring potential successors and socialization through "shop talk" all transmit intangible capital from one generation to the next. In this process, open and transparent communication is crucial to a positive experience (Bloeman-Bekx et al., 2021).

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution in family firms differs from that in other organizations because conflict is deeply rooted in both the business and personal lives of family members. Leaving the family firm involves much more than simply quitting a job, as the business and family are closely intertwined. Family members tend to postpone resolving conflicts due to underlying issues embedded in family relationships (Kubicek & Machek, 2020).

Researchers have identified five major conflict resolution approaches: avoiding, contending, compromising, collaborating, and third-party intervention (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2006). In the avoiding approach, family leaders fail to address conflicts or deny their existence. While this strategy sidesteps confrontation, it may have disastrous results if conflict is allowed to fester and grow between family members. In the contending or competing approach, family business leaders attempt to impose their will and choices upon other family members. Unfortunately, this approach is frequently used in family firms and promotes contentious norms; therefore, conflict management norms in family businesses may also be contentious, leading to misunderstandings and harmful results (Sorenson, 1999). In the compromising or accommodation approach, there is an open exchange of ideas and an attempt to understand the position of others; however, neither party's desires are fully met. In a collaborative approach, there is an open exchange of ideas and an attempt to understand others. The leaders facilitate cooperation and collective decision-making, trying to find a mutually acceptable solution for all parties. This is the most effective conflict management strategy (Sorenson, 1999). Family business leaders may employ the first four conflict resolution strategies: avoiding, contending, compromising, and collaborating themselves. However, third parties may become necessary when individuals are unable or unwilling to resolve the conflict themselves. Third-party resolution may involve mediators or arbitrators. Mediators improve communication among disputing family members and highlight how the two sides may resolve the issue. Arbitrators often use similar techniques but have the option of imposing a solution to the conflict (Wall Jr & Callister, 1995).

In a similar analysis, Qiu and Freel (2020) propose four conflict management strategies: vacillation, domination, separation, and third-party intervention. Vacillation, analogous to the avoiding approach, involves shifting back and forth among alternative solutions when a final decision is not needed immediately, and the parties are willing to compromise over time. Domination, similar to contending and competing, involves one party asserting its position without concern for the others. This use of authority may work in the short term but often leads to feelings of resentment and further conflict in the long term. Separation involves distancing oneself from the conflict for a time to avoid escalation. This strategy allows family members to calm their emotions and gives them time to make a better decision. Finally, the third-party intervention involves bringing in an outsider to increase communication between the parties, as discussed above.

Family Firm Commitment

Grounded in organizational commitment, family firm commitment may counterbalance relationship conflict. Organizational commitment is commonly defined as the individual's psychological attachment to an organization (Yousef, 2017). Researchers have identified four family firm commitment bases: affective, normative, calculative, and imperative (Sharma & Irving, 2005). Affective commitment signifies an individual's emotional connection and affinity with the family business. Normative commitment refers to the individual's expected role in the family firm, often characterized as "ought to" behavior. Calculative commitment concerns pursuing the family business because of personal financial gain. Imperative commitment refers to a situation where the individual may lack sought-after business skills and have few employment alternatives outside the family firm.

Although all four kinds of commitment may lead family members to a career in the family business, researchers have found that affective commitment has the most positive consequences. For example, Sharma and Irving (2005) found that affective commitment had the strongest positive relationship with family business continuation. Cabrera-Suarez and Martin-Santana (2012) established empirical support for the positive significance of affective commitment in family firms. In other studies, Gagné et al. (2019) found that the successor's intrinsic motivation, a similar concept to affective commitment, was the strongest indicator of successful succession. De Massis et al. (2016) found that incumbents with higher affective commitment to the firm supported the succession process. Researchers suggested that successors high in affective commitment would work more diligently with company resources and employees (McMullen & Warwick, 2015). Finally, Memili et al. (2013) observed that relationship conflict negatively influenced affective commitment.

METHOD

Qualitative Interview Approach

We examined the experiences of 50 family business owners and managers regarding conflict in their family firms. We analyzed data from detailed, qualitative, semi-structured interviews using a grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We selected respondents in a purposive manner to create new theory or expand current theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Additional respondents were included to add assurance to the study's findings, ensuring that the information from new respondents became redundant or negligible (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). We reached the saturation point with 50 family firm respondents in this study.

The qualitative approach has been employed frequently in family business research. Notable examples include Kammerlander et al. (2015), who examined the use of shared stories, and Jaskiewicz et al. (2015), who investigated transgenerational entrepreneurship. More specifically, Cadieux et al. (2002) suggested that qualitative research methods are suitable for investigating the succession process and conflict in family businesses.

Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss (1967) promoted qualitative research techniques and popularized the term "grounded theory" to describe the discovery of theory directly from gathered data. While there was a debate about using relevant theory, Strauss (1987) suggested that research without any preconceived notions was difficult to achieve and proposed that researchers should be conversant with the literature before conducting grounded theory studies. Suddaby (2006) further stressed that researchers should examine related literature and concluded that scholars should not feign that they lacked knowledge of the literature. Therefore, we acknowledge that we had a working acquaintance with the literature before embarking on the current study. We developed and refined our theory throughout the research process during the interview stage, transcription stage, and storage of the documents in the ATLAS—ti software system.

Study Participants

The respondents' participation was confidential and anonymous. In this study, the authors disguised the names of individuals, places, and family firms. We labeled the participants as Respondents 1 through 50, randomly assigning the numbers. Local business associations, colleagues, acquaintances, and students assisted in locating prospective respondents. The authors were not affiliated with any of the participating family firms. One of the authors has a family business background as a successor.

We contacted 110 businesses to determine if they met the requirements of being a family business, at least 5 years in operation, and agreeable to participate in the research project. We used a purposive sampling technique (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). We focused on conflict among family members in each family business by interviewing owner/managers, family managers, and some nonfamily managers. We triangulated the data by drawing comparable data from multiple sources to test for internal consistency (Dana & Dana, 2005).

Data Collection

We followed an interview guide with a list of elicitation questions, but the interviews were semi-structured. We asked open-ended questions in the following categories: personal, company, family, and conflict in the business. A complete list of these questions is available from the authors. The authors performed the interviews at the workplaces of the family firms or by telephone. The interviews, conducted with 50 participants, were tape-recorded in one-on-one meetings, resulting in about 26 interview hours. The interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes, averaging 30 minutes each. Then, the authors transcribed the interviews, totaling 420 pages, for an average of 8.4 pages per interview. The data collection period lasted over two years. Then, we received repetitive responses with only minor new information forthcoming (Merriam, 2009).

Respondent Family Firms

There were 47 family businesses represented, as three companies had multiple respondents. The family firms of the respondents represented multiple industries, including 20 service companies, 10 retail companies, eight restaurants, five wholesale companies, three construction companies, and one manufacturing firm. The firms varied in age from five to 98 years, with a median of 28 years. At least one, and up to three, family generations were involved in all firms. In grouping the respondent companies, 21 were in the first generation, 20 were in the second generation, and nine were in the third generation of family ownership. The firms had from two to 10 family members in management and ownership and were in two south-central U.S. states, Texas and Louisiana. All companies remain in business with the exception of the gas distribution business owned by Respondent 45. See Table 1.

TABLE 1
SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Respondent	Family Firm	Age of Business	Company Position	F.B. Generation	Respondent Age Range	Respondent Family Position
1	Furniture Retail	43	Owner/Manager	1st	60s	Wife, mother
2	Bakery	49	Owner/Manager	2nd	40s	Daughter
3	Shaved Ice	7	Owner/Manager	1st	60s	Father
4	Photography	12	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Wife, sister
5	Business Consulting	5	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Husband, father
6	Car Dealership	27	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Son-in-law, Father
7	Plumbing	17	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Wife, mother
8	Plumbing	17	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Husband, father
9	Fitness Gym	10	Owner/Manager	1st	30s	Wife, mother
10	Men's Clothing	5	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Husband, father
11	Korean Restaurant	8	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Husband
12	Restaurant Supply	55	NF Female Mgr	2nd	50s	None
13	Restaurant Supply	55	Family Mgr	3rd	20s	Son, grandson
14	Tex-Mex Restaurant	22	Owner/Manager	2nd	30s	Wife, daughter
15	Drywall Services	50	Owner/Manager	2nd	40s	Son, husband
16	Car Tire/Repair Shop	10	Owner/Manager	2nd	30s	Son, brother
17	House Painting	65	Owner/Manager	2nd	50s	Son, brother
18	Communication Serv,	43	NF Male CEO	2nd	60s	None
19	Conveying & Supply	42	Owner/Manager	2nd	30s	Son, brother
20	Automobile Dealer	31	Family Mgr	3rd	30s	Son, nephew
21	Welding Supply	44	NF Male Mg	2nd	50s	None
22	Convenience Store	7	Family Mgr	1st	20s	Sister
23	Driving Center	12	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Husband, father
24	Income Tax Services	10	Owner/Manager	1st	30s	Brother
25	Hamburger Restaurant	45	NF Male Mgr	2nd	20s	None
26	Martial Arts Academy	25	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Husband, father
27	Barbecue Restaurant	56	Owner/Manager	3rd	50s	Daughter, niece
28	Property Management	41	Owner/Manager	1st	70s	Wife, mother
29	Credit Card Process	18	NF Male Mgr	1st	30s	None
30	Tire Store	52	Owner/Manager	3rd	40s	Wife, mother
31	Disc. Furniture Retail	73	Owner/Manager	2nd	70s	Son
32	Chicken Restaurant	79	NF Male Mgr	3rd	50s	None

33	Real Estate Appraisal	32	Owner/Manager	2nd	50s	Husband, father
34	Fire Equipment Manf.	23	Family Mgr	2nd	30s	Son-in-law
35	Fire Equipment Manf.	23	Owner/Manager	2nd	40s	Son
36	Appliance Services	48	Owner/Manager	2nd	30s	Wife, mother
37	Telecommunications	23	Owner/Manager	1st	50s	Wife, mother
38	Sporting Goods Retail	5	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Brother
39	Grocery Store	98	NF Male Mgr	3rd	40s	None
40	Cleaning Company	12	Owner/Manager	3rd	20s	Granddaughter
41	Jewelry Store	24	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Wife, mother
42	Auto Service Shop	52	Owner/Manager	2nd	50s	Son, husband
43	Convenience Stores	48	Owner/Manager	3rd	30s	Daughter, sister
44	Custom Woodwork	5	Owner/Manager	1st	30s	Husband, father
45	Gas Distribution	41	Owner/Manager	2nd	50s	Daughter, sister
46	Learning Center	5	Owner/Manager	1st	40s	Wife, mother
47	Home Construction	6	Owner/Manager	2nd	40s	Wife, mother
48	Dry Cleaning	26	Owner/Manager	2nd	30s	Daughter, mother
49	Construction/Repair	15	Owner/Manager	2nd	50s	Father, brother
50	Gas and Plumbing	98	Owner/Manager	3rd	50s	Wife, Sister-in-law

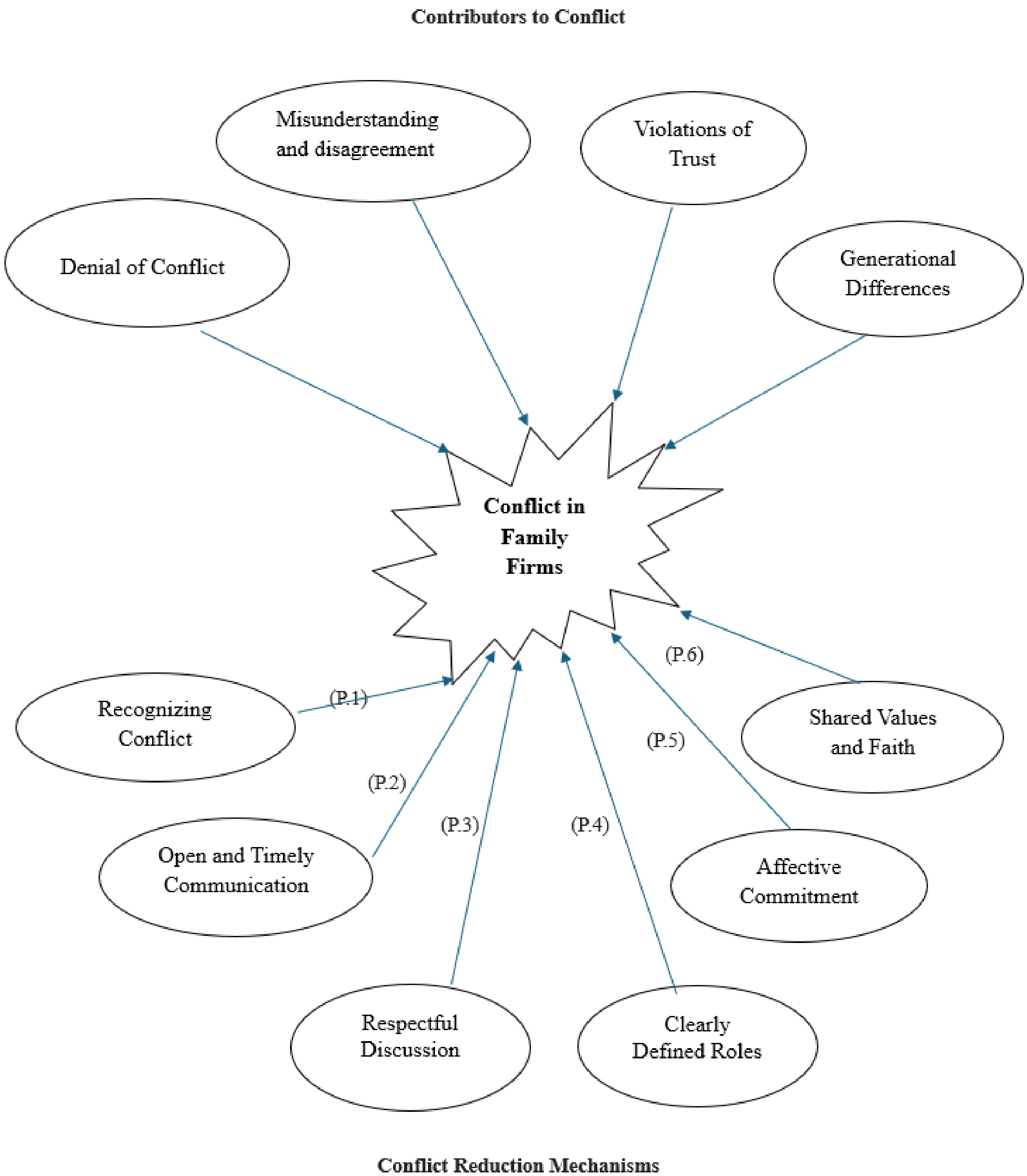
Family Firm Respondents

Our study is consistent with standards for qualitative research. The interviewees comprised 39 family-member owner/managers, four family-member managers, and seven nonfamily managers (see Table 1). There were 29 men and 21 women respondents, totaling 50, which exceeds the number of respondents (30) that Reay (2014) designated for significant qualitative research in family business studies. Saunders and Townsend (2016) also recommended that there be between 15 and 60 respondents, with a median of 32.5 participants.

Data Analysis

We followed qualitative data analysis procedures proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and adjusted by Suddaby (2006). First, we examined the respondents individually. Then, we turned to analysis across the respondents, looking for themes and connecting phrases among the 49 interviewees. After saving and storing the transcribed interviews in the ATLAS.ti software system, we coded and analyzed the data. Our study results led us to build the descriptive model, “Conflict in Family Firms: Contributors and Reduction Mechanisms,” shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
CONFLICT IN FAMILY FIRMS: CONTRIBUTORS AND REDUCTION MECHANISMS



Employing our respondents' in-vivo words and phrases, we performed six analysis steps, following the suggested protocol of Strauss and Corbin (1998). In the beginning step, Level 1, termed "open coding," we identified 750 codes. Next, in (Level 2), labeled as "axial coding," we placed the 750 codes into 443 categories, identifying them by Respondent (1 through 50). See Table 2.

TABLE 2
AXIAL CODING – GENERAL CATEGORIES

General Categories	Respondent
Personal background	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 ,29,30,31, 32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Company history	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 ,29,30,31, 32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Company operations	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 ,29,30,31, 32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Family business characteristics	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 ,29,30,31, 32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Career advice	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28 ,29,30,31, 32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Owner/Manager	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,14,15,16,17,19,20,23,24,26,27,28,30,31,33,35,36,37 ,38,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50
Family Manager	13,20,22,34
Nonfamily Manager	12,18,21,25,29,32,39
Denial of conflict	10,17,19,22,23,24,28,33,37
Misunderstanding,argue	2,3,7,8,10,14,15,17,20,31,37,43,46,47,48,50
Violations of trust	8,28,34,36,45
Generation issues	11,12,18,29,34,37
Tech knowledge differ	12,43
Recognition of conflict	1,2,3,14,20,21,27,29,30,31,37,44,50
Communication	8,9,18, 19,27,44,48,50
Respectful discussion	8, 24,25,32,35,50
Affective commitment	2,13,14,16,17,18,19,20,32,33,41,46
Positive introduction	13,17,18,19,20
Conflict resolution	8,9,19,26,32,38,40,44,47,48
Clearly defined roles	2,7,8,13,14,22,25,27,39,46,48,50
Separate personal life	13,14
Shared values	9,28,32,33
Shared faith	3,16,23,26,33,44,50
Professional conduct	6,41,42,49
Childcare, family help	4,5,14,20,25,27,28,43,50

Step three, or Level 3, described as "selective coding" by Strauss and Corbin (1998), involves developing the themes across the respondents and coding into general categories. Here, we coded the data into 25 general categories, as shown in Table 2. Then, we compressed the data into 12 central categories, including contributors to conflict, denial of conflict, misunderstanding and disagreement, violations of trust, generational differences, conflict reduction mechanisms, recognition of conflict, open and timely communication, clearly defined roles, affective commitment, and shared values and faith. This was Level 4 analysis. We developed our model from this base: "Conflict in Family Firms: Contributors and Reduction Mechanisms." Then, we explained our findings and six propositions to advance theory regarding conflict reduction in family firms. Thus, we completed the final two steps of the process, Level 5 – interrelating the explanations and Level 6 – delineating the theory. See Table 3.

TABLE 3
SELECTIVE CODING – CENTRAL CATEGORIES

Central Categories	Findings or Corresponding Proposition
Denial of conflict	Initial Findings
Misunderstanding and arguing	Initial Findings
Violations of trust	Initial Findings
Generational issues	Initial Findings
Contributors to conflict	Initial Findings
Recognition of conflict	1
Open and timely communication	2
Respectful discussion	3
Clearly defined roles	4
Family member affective commitment	5
Shared values and faith	6
Conflict reduction	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

FINDINGS

This section presents findings that provide a basis for our model and propositions.

Contributors to Conflict

There are many causes of relationship conflict in family firms. Here, we describe the four most prevalent areas of conflict among the respondents in our study, including denial of conflict, misunderstanding and disagreement, violations of trust, and generational differences.

Denial of Conflict

This study found various forms of denial of conflict, including refusing to share information, unwillingness to cooperate, ignorance, lack of communication, overconfidence, misunderstanding of conflict, and lying. Some family firm members were reluctant to discuss conflict, and some respondents claimed no conflict in their business. For example, Respondent 10 of the men's clothing store stated, "No, there is no conflict. None at all." Similarly, Respondent 23 of the driving center claimed, "There is not any conflict. No conflict." Respondent 28 of the property management company declared, "There are never any conflicts, and we have been married 38 years."

Some respondents made confusing and contradictory comments. For example, Respondent 17 of the house painting company answered defensively, "No, there is no conflict whatsoever. Our family is close-knit, and our family view has always been us against them. So, our family always sticks together. We might argue with each other, but no one else could argue with us." In another case, Respondent 33 of the real estate appraisal firm denied that there was conflict, "I will be honest, no, I do not sense any." His son overheard this comment and interjected, "What about when Jonathan plays with his golf ball all day? There is conflict, then." Some family members denied that conflict existed within their businesses, creating a fantasy state where everyone gets along, and there are no issues that drive family members apart. Because of this lack of reality, resolving issues among family members is negatively impacted. Respondent 1 of the retail furniture store stated, "We have conflict every day. I think it's common because it's family. Otherwise, you are lying." Therefore, our findings suggest that the denial of conflict is not conducive to family firm operation and will increase conflict.

Misunderstanding, Argument, and Disagreement

The respondents reported that misunderstanding, argument, and disagreement were common among their family businesses. For example, Respondent 14 of the Tex-Mex restaurant remarked, "In a family business, I think that it can cause a lot of conflicts when you work with family members. I think the toughest part is separating business from personal relationships." Respondent 31 of the discount furniture store concurred, "My mother and I fought a lot, I am sorry to tell you. Yes, there was conflict. We argued a lot. But yes, my mother and I, we did argue quite a bit." Respondent 46 of the learning center said, "One of the things that I have noticed, especially with my husband and I, is we see things differently. So, we have times where we just have disagreements. And we do not always see eye to eye on everything."

Family businesses are composed of related individuals who have different points of view and opinions. For example, Respondent 43 of the convenience store business recalled, "My dad literally thought he was always right until he attended a leadership workshop when he was 42 years old, the year before I joined the business. He was so stunned that he still tells people about learning he was not always right. So, working for him as he gained self-awareness and struggled to reset entrenched habits was tough for me and my brothers." Therefore, as expected, the respondents reported that misunderstanding, arguing, and fighting were common in family firms and would increase conflict.

Violations of Trust

In addition to misunderstandings, arguments, and disagreements, serious violations of trust occurred among the respondent family firms. We characterize these violations of trust as long-term and deeply ingrained. For example, Respondent 45, at the gas distribution company, had a serious conflict with her brother over 30 years before finally selling the family business; she recounted, "As I look back, I do not see how it is possible that almost any family relationship would be better after working together than they would be if they did not. We had several very tough times throughout the decades. My dad had many more of these contentious incidents with my brother. Most people cannot separate business from pleasure, and I found myself not wanting to be around my brother or niece more than a few times in recent years, and I am sure they felt the same. If you just want your family to be your family, do not work with them. You see sides of your family you would not see if you did not work together."

Respondent 36, at the appliance services company, reported an extreme violation of trust by her husband, "Our secretary quit, and so I called someone that I grew up with and asked her to come in. This is where the lifetime story comes in. She started having an affair with my husband, which was very out of character for him. It was very strange. I know the kind of person she is now; looking back, I was too naive and nice. But anyway, he had an affair with the secretary." In the above cases, violations of trust deeply hurt family members with long-lasting consequences.

Generational Issues

Family firms often accentuate generational differences. Unlike nonfamily businesses, family firms must integrate multiple generations of family members to survive. Expectations concerning the leadership of the business vary widely between generations and may lead to conflict. Respondent 34, at the fire equipment manufacturer, noted, "The nephews think they will get a multimillion-dollar business handed to them one day. That and the generational gap are the main conflicts." Environmental and economic conditions change as family businesses pass from one generation to the next. Respondent 11, from the Korean restaurant, observed, "There is always conflict between generations because of cultural differences of how people are brought up and what they grew up. There is always going to be constant conflict between generations. That just comes with the history of each generation."

As time progresses and family firms age, generational differences arise in technology and gender issues. For instance, Respondent 12, at the restaurant supply wholesaler, commented, "There is a definite difference between the older generation and the younger generation as far as technology. The younger generation embraces technology more than the older generation. They see the benefits of spending the money to upgrade to the latest technology, whereas the older generation is more like we will make do with what we have." Further, Respondent 43, at the convenience store, noted, "My dad grew up in a man's world, and my mom was his equal owner in the business, but he was the CEO and sometimes minimized her contributions. He saw my brother as his natural successor and that caused stress for all three of us and ultimately contributed to me recommending our way forward as equals when we bought the business." Due to generational and gender bias, Respondent 43's father was slow to recognize her outstanding leadership ability in the family business. This aggravated the conflict both between and within generations.

We characterized the most common areas of conflict among the respondents in our study as denial of conflict, misunderstanding and disagreement, violations of trust, and generational differences. These findings allowed us to examine how conflict may be reduced in family firms.

PROPOSITIONS

The above findings led us to develop six propositions for conflict reduction in family businesses. The first four propositions address steps in the conflict resolution process, including recognizing conflict, clear and timely communication, respectful discussion, and clearly defined roles. The last two propositions relate to long-term conflict reduction through affective commitment and shared values and faith.

Recognizing that Conflict Exists

Recognizing that such conflict is inevitable and expected when multiple family members work together in a family business is a starting point for understanding and reducing relationship conflict in family firms. Conflict is a normal part of human nature and is expected when two or more individuals care deeply about their family business. For example, Respondent 1 stated, "There is conflict every day. We get along, but everybody has their days." Similarly, Respondent 2 admitted, "I don't think you can work with family without having conflict." Respondent 14 agreed, "I think it can cause many conflicts when you work with family members." Respondent 21 added, "Yes. (laughter) There is conflict. That is true, no matter the size of the company. You are going to see that in any family or family business." Respondent 30 concurred, "There has always been conflict between family members. I think that comes with family business; everybody wants to do things differently." The first step toward reducing conflict in family firms is to realize that conflict exists. Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 1: *Recognizing that conflict exists will reduce conflict in family firms.*

Open and Timely Communication

After recognizing that conflict exists, the next step is to start communicating. The respondents agreed that open and timely communication is essential in conflict resolution. Respondent 8, at the plumbing company, recognized this difficulty: "It was very hard at the beginning of the company. I did not communicate well. I just expected things to be done. I am just now realizing that not everybody does things my way." Respondent 18, at the communication services company, explained this conflict resolution step, "You talk. You just talk. I mean it's just communication. I try to have a relaxed conversation as much as possible. Similarly, Respondent 27, at the barbeque restaurant, commented, "I would say for the family business, I know when I step in the door that there is a problem. By the end of the day, my aunts and cousins will be calling. They will call."

Further, Respondent 44, at the custom woodwork company, stated, "I'm sure that conflict will arise, it always does. But you have to learn to work through it, communicate, and step aside. One of the best things to do is not to criticize another person in front of other people. Pull them to the side and have a private conversation with them." Respondent 48, at the dry-cleaning company, concurred, "Like any family business, we've had our fair share of disagreements, for sure, but we handle them with open communication and mutual respect. We all want what's best for the company." Finally, Respondent 50, at the gas and plumbing company, remarked, "I think the guys talk it out. You know, sometimes they'll cool off and then come back."

Conflict resolution involves open communication when the time is right, especially after the hurt feelings and raw emotions of family members have subsided, but before those feelings have escalated into a greater problem. Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 2: *Open and timely communication will reduce conflict in family firms.*

Respectful Discussion

Discussion is closely related to open and timely communication in reducing conflict in family firms. Of course, discussion begins with communication, but the two-way nature of discussion is particularly significant. The respondents described discussions as taking place after a cooling-off period or when emotions had settled, allowing rational speech to be more effective. For example, Respondent 24 of the tax services company recalled, “I think we would sit and discuss whatever the conflict was and then try and produce a mutual solution on how to, you know, dissolve, resolve or fix the conflict.” Respondent 25 of the hamburger restaurant stated, “Not every person is always on the same page. So, there are discussions and things to be voted on.”

Additionally, Respondent 27, at the barbecue restaurant, said, “You learn to agree to disagree. Everything won’t go exactly as you want. You go with the flow.” Respondent 32, at the chicken restaurant, remarked, “The old saying is iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another, but I think there is something to that.” Finally, Respondent 50, at the gas and plumbing company, opined, “I can probably count on one hand how many debates I have seen, and they are not violent, they are not disrespectful. They get a little loud, but it’s respectful.” Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 3: *Respectful discussions will reduce conflict in family firms.*

Clearly Defined Roles

Clearly defined roles were significant to the respondents in maintaining order in their family businesses. Respondent 2, at the bakery, stated, “I think the important part about working in a family business is figuring out everybody’s roles, their expectations, and being clear about that.” Respondent 7, at the plumbing company, agreed, “I know my role, and my husband knows his role. He stays in his lane, and I try to stay in my lane.” Expanding on this idea, Respondent 39, at the family grocery store, added, “I would stretch certain areas for each individual to run and maintain, so there is no conflict of who’s getting to do this and that. Each person would have their set area of expertise.” Respondent 48, at the dry-cleaning company, said, “Having clearly defined roles has also helped reduce the tension and streamline decision-making.”

Other role-defining factors included separating family and business and understanding generational differences. Respondent 14, at the Tex-Mex restaurant, remarked, “I think the toughest part is separating business with personal relationships.” Respondent 13, at the restaurant supply business, also recognized this and explained, “We know how to separate our personal life and our business life.” Regarding generational differences, Respondent 25, at the hamburger restaurant, recounted, “Sometimes you play a role, especially with an individual who is 20 years old compared to somebody in their early forties. You can be out of tune with the younger people and what they’re into and doing.” The issue was understanding family members across generations and building a support bridge to reduce conflict. Respondent 18, at the communication services company, explained, “On a personal basis, I work very hard to understand what about a person is generational. I try to understand the generational thing. So, I ask questions. For example, I tease about eating avocados and things like that. So, I think it is very important for leaders to understand generational differences and be able to sort out the myth from the fact.” Finally, clearly defined roles help everyone in family firms. Respondent 50, at the gas and plumbing company, said, “In our family business, everybody knows their role and participates. We are like a well-oiled wheel. We each know our duties, and I believe we have mutual respect. I think we also understand each other’s positions. We have always worked well.” Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 4: *Clearly defined roles will reduce conflict in family firms.*

Family Member Affective Commitment

Researchers view affective commitment as the strongest form of family firm commitment. Many respondents reported affective commitment, often using the term "love." For example, Respondent 2, at the bakery, stated emphatically, "I love it. When you own your own business, it becomes your whole world for a little while. I work a lot, but I love it, it's, I just enjoy every part of it." Respondent 13, of the restaurant supply company, expressed affective commitment as follows, "I love the business. I love that there is a new challenge every day, and I like being able to help people. Also, Respondent 19, at the conveying and supply company, remarked, "I enjoy the business. I am very blessed by the fact that I got to join my family's business, and that I enjoy it. I love what I do every day." Further, Respondent 32, at the chicken restaurant, commented, "I do not just enjoy, I love the business. So, it has been a fun process of growing the business, growing the brand, and developing the people."

Ideally, incumbent family business leaders may increase affective commitment by showing their children their love for the business. In turn, the successors accept the direction provided by their parents and learn to love and enjoy the family business. For example, Respondent 17, at the house painting business, recalled, "I always enjoyed working. I started this job by going to work for my dad before I realized it was a job. I thought it was just fun to go to work with my dad. Then, he would pay me ten bucks. I thought it was great when I was 12 years old. Then, as I worked through high school and college, I realized that it is a good way to make a living with flexibility, which I enjoy." Similarly, Respondent 18, at the communication services company, explained, I come by this profession honestly. My dad installed central office equipment. I was maybe seven or eight years old when I first went to the central office. I held the spool of cord for my dad while he lashed cable. It is a kind of artwork. It was fascinating and very logical to me."

The interviewees repeatedly expressed an affective commitment to their family firm. Respondent 14, at the Tex-Mex restaurant, remarked, "I like that we are family-owned, so I feel it is very personal. We have created many relationships with customers and business owners, and just being in the community has been nice." Likewise, Respondent 41, at the jewelry store, stated, "I love the artistic side of merchandising, but truly I enjoy people. I love my customers; I love the relationships. I love the people that I work with. I am fortunate." When incumbent family leaders and successors come together and learn to love their family business, this will heal some of the wounds caused by relationship conflict and improve the work environment. There will be less conflict if family members love the business and enjoy what they are doing. Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 5: *Family member affective commitment will reduce conflict in family firms.*

Shared Values and Faith

Family members often come together and stay in their family business because they share common values and faith. A moral compass guides the family in moving forward while fostering a sense of unity among its members. This study identified two major guiding principles: shared values and shared faith.

Shared values were rooted in family business ownership, professional goals, and personal objectives. For example, Respondent 39, at the grocery store company, commented, "We value customer service and pride ourselves in providing a family-owned and operated field to a grocery shopping experience." Respondent 30, at the tire store, stated, "I think just being a family-owned and honest business is our biggest strength. That is what people appreciate about coming here." Respondent 28, at the property management firm, recalled, "Our values are centered in customer satisfaction. None of us go home at night without acknowledging our customers to let them know we will be back on it in the morning." Similarly, Respondent 33, at the real estate appraisal company, said, "I hope the company's biggest strength is integrity. I say that because I hope we conduct our business in such a way that we gain trust more than anything from the people who seek our services." Shared values were also personal in family businesses. For example, Respondent 9, at the fitness gym, remarked, "I married the most patient man, and he knew that the fitness gym was my baby, so this has been my dream. I have always wanted to own a gym. So, he works with me, and we manage it together." Respondent 32, at the chicken restaurant, noted, "There are good-hearted people here, and there's a sense of working together, which has made this business very successful.

Additionally, shared values merged into shared faith. Respondent 26, at the martial arts academy, explained, "I think our strengths are family, our people, and the fact that we are rooted in Christian values. That is our strength." Many respondents expressed that shared faith was integral to the operation of their family business and bonded family members together, reducing relationship conflict. Respondent 3, at the shaved ice company, remarked, "God will help you if you invite him through your plans. I went through some tough times, but I realized it was my plans, not God's." Respondent 16, at the car tire and repair shop, stated, "Prayer comes first for any decision, whether big or small. I will bring it to the Lord. Also, I have wise counsel, especially from my dad. Further, Respondent 26, at the martial arts academy, explained, "There are conflicts, but it is nothing that cannot be resolved through prayer, communication, and diligent work." Sharing values and faith helped many of the family businesses in this study to cope with and reduce conflict. Therefore, we propose the following.

Proposition 6: *Shared values and faith will reduce conflict in family firms.*

DISCUSSION

Researchers report that family businesses are full of conflict (Alderson, 2015; Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007). This study, focused on relationship conflict among family firm members, provides information concerning factors contributing to conflict and mechanisms to reduce that conflict. The findings established a significant basis for understanding the factors that cause conflict. We proposed a model and six propositions to better understand contributing factors causing conflict and aid in reducing conflict both theoretically and in practice.

Implications for Theory

Scholars have identified several sub-areas in family firm conflict not commonly found in nonfamily organizations, including succession conflict and generational conflict (Bettinelli et al., 2022). Family firms differ from other governance structures because succession is more significant and shows only a 30% success rate (Lansberg, 1988; U.S. Family Business Survey, 2019). Succession is a process of change that generates conflict for both incumbents and successors. Handler (1990) referred to a process of mutual role adjustment, which requires change by the incumbent and the successor and leads to additional stress and conflict. Because succession is integral to family business continuation and contributes to additional conflict, conflict resolution is significant for family firms and deserves further discussion.

Researchers have identified five major conflict resolution approaches: avoiding, contending, compromising, collaborating, and third-party intervention (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2006). We equate the avoiding approach to the denial of conflict presented in this study and found that denial was more common than implied in the literature. The avoiding approach bypasses confrontation but allows conflict to continue unchecked, which may have disastrous consequences for family firms (Sorenson, 1999). If continued over time or to the extreme, the avoiding approach or the denial of conflict may lead to the demise of the family business because conflict will not be addressed. Therefore, family business leaders should be proactive, rather than reactive, and address conflict before it can fester and grow. The eight respondents who denied having conflict may be in danger of losing their family businesses.

Next, the contending approach, in which family business leaders attempt to impose their will and choices on the family business, may also not be conducive to long-term success. Respondent 43, in the convenience store business, experienced gender and generational bias from her father, who also attempted to impose his will on the company's management after his retirement. Respondent 43 and her two brothers tactfully fended off their father's assertions and led their company to continued success and growth within their industry.

Furthermore, Respondent 27, at the barbecue restaurant, demonstrated a compromising approach, saying, "You learn to agree to disagree. Everything will not go the exact way you want it to. You go with the flow.” However, in this approach, Respondent 27’s desires were not fully met, nor were the wishes of her aunts and cousins, as Sorenson (1999) suggested. If continued over time, the compromising approach may lead to many unsatisfied family members.

In this study, the typical third-party approach, which involved mediators or arbitrators to settle disputes, was not used except at some larger firms, including Companies 6, 12, 20, 39, 43, and 45. These companies used industry trade groups, performance groups, lawyers, accountants, and consultants with mixed success. Among our respondents and in alignment with the literature (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2006), the preferred conflict resolution approach was the collaborating approach. The respondents described this approach as respectful discussion, which took place after emotions had died down and family members could discuss the issues rationally and calmly. In respectful discussion, family business leaders did not overwhelm other family members and listened and engaged in two-way dialogue.

Implications for Practice

The problem of denial of conflict found in this study warrants further discussion. The evidence from the family business literature firmly states that conflict exists in practically every family firm (Carlock &Ward, 2001; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2007). In this study, we found a significant number of respondents (9), who denied the existence of conflict within their family firms. Although the literature reports that denial is a problem (Sorenson, 1999), it was more pronounced in our study. We suggested that the reasons for this denial included refusal to share information, unwillingness to cooperate, ignorance, lack of communication, overconfidence, misunderstanding of conflict, and lying. The implication for practice is that the conflict exists whether the family business leader is aware of the conflict in their family firm or not. Therefore, family firm leaders must examine their own business and become aware of potential problems. Then, they may take steps, such as improving communication, engaging in respectful discussions, and establishing clearly defined roles to reduce conflict before it becomes unmanageable.

Furthermore, practitioners should be aware of two possible areas for long-term conflict resolution that emerged from this study: affective commitment (Sharma & Irving, 2005) and shared values and faith. First, family business leaders may actively instill a love for their family business in their children by exposing them to the family firm at a young age and making the business enjoyable. The successor will also acquire knowledge about the people and processes involved in the business (Ward, 1987). The incumbent should model a positive approach and refrain from whining and complaining about the family business in the presence of their children. “Shop talk” should be open and positive (Bloeman-Bekx et al., 2021). Conversely, successors should look to the benefits of a career in the family firm, such as flexibility, job security, and a high likelihood of advancement in the business. Successors should be respectful of their parents and grateful for the opportunity provided for them. Then, successors should acquire the skills needed to manage the business and demonstrate their performance (Barach et al., 1988).

Secondly, shared values and faith among family members aid the pattern of mutual love and affection established through affective commitment. Shared values and faith provide family firm members with a clear and agreed-upon direction. There is a standard to live by, and rules and procedures have a common basis for understanding. Therefore, daily practices fit into a long-term approach to business success. Also, based on shared values and faith, incumbents and successors should continue to develop high-quality relationships that started in the successor’s childhood (Kandade et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge that certain limitations apply to this study. While this qualitative study provides rich description and detail, we recognize its limitations concerning sample size and generalizability. The sample was composed entirely of U.S. citizens, which may vary from international samples. The respondents in this study were from two south-central U.S. states: Texas and Louisiana. Demographically, the respondents represented the region with ethnic groups and races, such as White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian. However, there may be regional variation within the U.S. regarding the views expressed by respondents. Further, we recognize that while the respondents were generous with their time in completing interviews, family business owners and managers work on busy schedules, and their time is limited.

We invite future research comparing international respondents worldwide, such as European, Asian, Middle Eastern, South American, and Australian, to explore how conflict in family firms remains the same or varies culturally. According to Hofstede (1984), the U.S. culture reflects low power distance and high individuality. Examining conflict resolution practices in other countries, which vary culturally, would be interesting. Further, while this study focused on relationship conflict, researchers may explore task and process conflict within family firms, a topic that may be under-researched (Kellermanns & Eddleston, 1984). While this study suggests that conflict may be more profound and longer-lasting because of family relationships, researchers may explore comparisons between family firms and nonfamily businesses regarding the presence of conflict and conflict reduction mechanisms.

Conclusion

Conflict is common and expected in family firms; moreover, this study found that the denial of conflict, misunderstanding and disagreement, violations of trust, and generational differences contribute to family firm conflict. While relationship conflict is pervasive in family firms, actions can be taken to ameliorate conditions. Both family business incumbents and successors may engage in behavior and adopt attitudes conducive to conflict reduction. Immediate problems may be resolved through recognizing conflict, open and timely communication, respectful discussion, and clearly defined roles. In the long term, family business leaders may exemplify, and successors may accept, affective commitment as well as shared values and faith to reduce conflict.

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