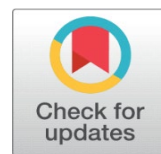# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND SUCCESSION IN FAMILY-OWNED SMALL BUSINESSES

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ABSTRACT

Family-owned small businesses generate approximately 44% of all U.S. economic activity making them essential to the nation's economic health. Unfortunately, they often struggle with a variety of challenges, including succession. While the development of models and theoretical understandings of how succession may occur in family-owned small businesses is helpful for extending the related body of literature, practical research is needed to better understand the ways succession is handled among the key stakeholders, including the incumbent, the successor, and the family. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore conflict management and succession strategies employed by leaders and employees of family-owned small businesses. Data were collected via interviews with nine people from three family-owned small businesses located in the upper Midwestern United States. A total of five main themes emerged, including Employees' perceptions and their communication styles determine succession strategies, the nature of succession depends on communication, fostered succession through keeping customers happy and succession planning, succession challenges that leaders and employees encounter, and success was demonstrated by internal and external motivators. Eight subthemes emerged, including keep customers happy, agreeable communication, succession planning, knowledge sharing, conflict, motives, do what needs to be done, and commitment to organization. Findings from this study shed light on ways conflict management and succession strategies employed in family-owned small businesses may be improved to help these businesses overcome common challenges and ensure survival from one generation to the next.

Keywords: Family-Owned Small Businesses, Family-Owned Businesses, Conflict Management, Succession

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (2019), small businesses play a vital role in the U.S. economy, generating 44% of economic activity. Despite their importance, small businesses often struggle with several challenges Barber et al. (2016). Many small businesses are family-owned Alwis (2016), over 80% of businesses around the world are family-owned Malhotra (2010). Family-owned small businesses (FOSBs) often contend with a unique set of challenges, such as conflict Alderson (2015) and communication issues Michael-Tsabari and Weiss (2013). The key characteristics that distinguish FOSBs, including the family unit and relationships between family members, are also common sources of conflict within these types of organizations Ghee et al. (2015). As Ghee et al. (2015) explained, conflicts within FOBs may arise over disagreements about business goals, product/service

offerings, time spent away from the business, and even inattention to important family events.

The type of conflict emphasized in this research was that arising from succession in FOSBs. As Liu et al. (2015) explained, "Succession is one of the most important decisions a leader will make to ensure sustainable business performance" (p. 2). Wasim et al. (2018) referred to succession as "The most challenging time in the life of a family business, in terms of both business dilemmas and personal expectations" (p. 2). The challenges of business succession are due to the number of difficult decisions that must be made to ensure the survival of a FOSB Wasim et al. (2018). Successful succession is critical for the longevity of FOSBs, and issues related to succession may contribute to the reality that over 70% of FOSBs fail after the first generation (Family Business Institute, 2007). Several factors can affect the success of succession in FOSBs, such as the number of family stakeholders, the duration of family ownership, and an incumbent's emotional attachment to the business De et al. (2016).

Existing research on FOSBs is limited – research exists on conflicts in small businesses, but less is known about conflict and succession. In terms of succession, most of the existing scholarship is theoretical in nature Alwis (2016). A practical examination was needed to better understand the ways succession is handled among key stakeholders in FOSBs, including the incumbent, the successor, and the family. Successful succession in FOSBs requires planning. Incumbents, successors, and employees must all plan for succession and have intentions to carry out succession plans. When thorough succession plans exist and are followed, FOSBs are far more likely to survive from one generation to the next Alwis (2016). In addition, when succession plans are enacted, the process is less likely to result in significant conflict Michael-Tsabari and Weiss (2013). This study followed a multiple case study design, which is appropriate for the broad exploration of a study topic Yin (2003). The study specifically examined conflict management and succession by focusing on the following questions. (1) What is the nature of succession-related conflict in FOSBs? (2) What strategies are used by employees and leaders of FOSBs to manage succession and related conflicts?

The population for this research consisted of employees of FOSBs located in the Midwestern United States. Of the 28.8 million small businesses in the United States, approximately 19% are family owned Dougert (2018). Accordingly, the population of U.S. FOSBs consists of approximately 5.4 million organizations. According to the Small Business Administration (2018), the average small business consists of just over 11 employees. Thus, an approximation of the population of workers in U.S. FOSBs is 60 million. Because the Midwest comprises approximately one-fifth of the U.S. population U.S. Census (2020), an estimation of the population of employees of FOSBs in the Midwestern United States is 12 million. The focus of the current study was family-owned small businesses (FOSBs); that is, entities that are both family-owned and classified as small businesses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Small businesses are independently owned and operated, organized to make profits, and, because of their size, do not dominate entire industries U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) (2012). Despite their size, small businesses are a massive economic force in the United States, responsible for a large percentage of the nation's employment and economic growth U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) (2016). According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) (2016), small businesses account for 99.9% of all U.S. firms, employ nearly half of private sector employees, and contribute over 40% of total payroll in the private sector. The

nature and size of small businesses allow them to be more adaptable to changing economies and strategies Taneja et al. (2016), allowing them to more effectively weather economic and social shifts.

Because small businesses form the backbone of the U.S. economy, it is important to understand ways to help these firms survive numerous common challenges. Lussier and Halabi (2010) noted there is no single theory on the cause of small business owners' failures after launching small business initiatives Turner and Endres (2017). As Turner and Endres (2017) stated, "Identifying strategies that contribute to the survival of small business and entrepreneurial launches is necessary to assure the continuing vibrancy of the U.S. economy" (p. 34). Some of the common struggles small business owners face include difficulties securing funding Barkhatov et al. (2016), Gill and Biger (2012), regulatory issues Bailey and Thomas (2017), Bradford et al. (2018), employee turnover Hom et al. (2017), market constraints, and leadership issues (Putra & Cho, 2019). Current statistics published by the SBA (2016) specified that of the small businesses recognized in 2014, 79.9% survived until 2015, which is the highest 1-year percentage of small-business start-ups survival since 2005. Additionally, between 2004 and 2014, only around 78.5% of new business start-ups continued after their first year of operations (SBA, 2016).

2.1. FAMILY -OWNED BUSINESSES

FOBs are the oldest form of business organization, and they operate across industries and sectors Devins and Jones (2016). The intersection of relationships between family members in an FOB, the family unit, and the business itself creates features that distinguish FOBs from businesses that are not family owned Dewi and Dhewanto (2012). Family-owned businesses can range significantly in size and may include small neighbourhood restaurants as well as large, multinational corporations Ghee et al. (2015).

The force of FOBs is not limited to the United States; around 80% of businesses around the world are family-owned Malhotra (2010). For example, between 70% and 80% of all enterprises across Europe are family owned Mandl (2008), as are 67% of all enterprises in Australia (KPMG, 2009). Family-owned businesses account for around 65% of private sector enterprises in the United Kingdom, contributing approximately 31% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP; IFB, 2008). In the United States, the proportion of family firms is as high as 90%, with some estimates indicated that FOBs contribute over 60% of the nation's GDP Astrachan and McMillan (2003). While much research exists on small businesses and FOBs, less scholarly attention has been paid to firms that are both small and family owned. However, existing research does indicate FOSBs have poor long-term survival rates; only 30% of FOSBs survive transfers to second generations, and 15% survive into third generations Alwis (2016). Most FOSBs fail to survive ownership transitions across generations because of transfer issues, making effective succession a key to the sustainability of FOSBs Ghee et al. (2015). Fifty percent of new small-business start-ups, including those that are family-owned, fail within the first 5 years of operation Turner and Endres (2017).

2.2. CONFLICT IN FAMILY-OWNED SMALL BUSINESSES

The key characteristics that distinguish FOSBs, including the family unit and relationships between family members, are also common sources of conflict within these types of organizations Ghee et al. (2015). As Ghee et al. (2015) explained, conflicts within FOBs may arise over disagreements about business goals,

succession, product/service offerings, time spent away from the business, and even inattention to important family events. While conflict can create significant challenges for any type of business, the unique structure of FOBs makes them prone to a host of issues that can create conflict within the organization. Levinson (1971) argued that conflicts are defining characteristics of FOBs. According to Corbetta and Salvato (2012), FOB conflict can arise from several factors, including: (a) nepotism, (b) co-opting unqualified family members into leadership positions, (c) infighting caused by strains to relationships between family members, and (d) conflicts between family and non-family employees. Nepotism is common in family succession decisions, as leaders often choose family members or offspring as successors, even if they are not the most qualified individuals Liu et al. (2015). Research indicates that nepotism can be particularly detrimental to FOBs, often leading to failure or bankruptcy Riggio and Riggio (2013). Family-owned business are also more prone to conflict because family-related conflicts that occur outside of the business are often brought into the business Kotlar and Massis (2013). As Caputo et al. (2018) explained,

Family businesses have thus been labelled fertile grounds for conflict due to the fact that the members managing the company are bound together, not only by co-ownership, but also by family ties, creating a nexus of economic and family-centered goals to be simultaneously achieved. (p. 5).

Further, the intertwining of family ties and business bonds is inevitable in FOBs, while family ties are not factors in firms that are not family owned Trippe and Baumoel (2015). While issues that create conflict in FOBs are widely recognized, they have also been under-researched Caputo et al. (2018). As Xi et al. (2013) noted, "Although conflict is a core concern, we know surprisingly little about it and even less about conflict management in family business" (p. 123).

Three main types of conflict are particularly common in FOBs: role conflict, distinctive agency conflicts, and succession conflicts Caputo et al. (2018). Role conflict describes issues that arise when an employee is tasked with several roles and expectations that are difficult to simultaneously perform. In FOBs, role conflict is common because of the multiple roles that owners and employees are tasked with Caputo et al. (2018). Distinctive agency conflicts can occur when the ambitions of family members and others within an FOB are not in alignment. These types of conflicts can arise between family members in different roles, between family and non-family member employees, or between owners and lenders Caputo et al. (2018). Most researchers have categorized business-related conflict as either intragroup or dualistic Efendy (2013). A task conflict refers to disagreements and differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions among group members regarding work-related issues. Task conflicts can occur over the allocation of resources, procedures, and policies, or what investments should be made De et al. (2004). Relationship conflicts can result from perceptions of interpersonal incompatibility, such as a disagreement about personal values or preferences, which can contribute to tension, annoyance, and animosity Efendy (2013).

In another examination of conflict, Pondy (1967) argued that three common types of conflict include those related to competition for resources, drives for autonomy, and differences in goals and priorities. Wall and Callister (1995) summarized the potential antecedents of conflict and identified a threefold grouping: (a) individual characteristics, including personality, goals, values, commitment to position, anger, stress, and desire for autonomy; (b) interpersonal factors, including perceptual interface (beliefs about another's intention), communication, behaviour, structure, and previous interactions; and (c) specific

issues, which are complex and multiple. Harvey et al. (1998) also identified common causes of conflict.

2.3. INTERVENTIONS/SOLUTIONS TO CONFLICT

In family businesses, the counselor can harness the business as a resource to recognize the family because business interactions, morals, ethics, and dynamics frequently reflect the forces at work of the family Lansberg (1992), Pieper et al. (2013). In the future, the business can be used as a diagnostic tool and an intervention point in addition to the family Alderfer (1980), Alderfer and Smith (1982), or, to a certain extent, in place of the family if, for instance, members of the family are unwilling or unable to participate in analysis Pieper et al. (2013). For example, a family with strong religious values may import these values into the business and make them guiding principles for running the business, resulting in stewardship over employees, customers, and the family business legacy Pieper et al. (2013), Schein (1983). On the other hand, a family with dysfunctional dynamics (discord, jealousy, etc.) may also import these dysfunctions into the business, straining the professional relationships among family members and resulting in stress for family and nonfamily employees alike Kets (1993), Pieper et al. (2013). By examining a business as a looking glass Alderfer (1980), Alderfer and Smith (1982), counselors can harness a profound diagnosis of the business as an instrument for perceiving the family.

The interdependence between the two systems Litz (2008), however, makes changes to FOBs far more complex. The rigidity of business relationships (because of the formal nature of business organizations where contractual arrangements prevail) often reinforce family relationships (that are rather informal in nature) and can foster resistance to change or even reverse changes made in the family system Pieper et al. (2013), Tagiuri and Davis (1996). To overcome such resistance, counselors are instructed to research and recognize both business and family structures Pieper et al. (2013), Whiteside and Herz-Brown (1991). Next, in functioning with families in business, counselors may possibly have the families reflect about greater order objectives to simplify open discussion and deliberations Pieper et al. (2013), Sherif (1958). Conflict in families that are in business together can use the business as a higher order goal.

If the family business is viewed as the epitome of the family legacy, the family should be permitted to ripen a common sense of collective character and experience the situation as a kinship group Pieper et al. (2013). This turn out to be especially significant when the family is large and geographically disseminated, or when family members have distant kinship connections (Pieper & Astrachan, 2008; Pieper et al. (2013).

At best, it is imperative that any strategy for intervention align with the culture, goals, and strategies of the family for which it is established McGoldrick and Hardy (2008), Pieper et al. (2013). Families may own businesses for a variety of reasons, such as providing income and jobs to family members, sources of identity, and reputation Danes et al. (1999), Olson et al. (2003), Pieper et al. (2013). As a result, creating an intervention strategy should take in consideration the strategy and primary objectives that the family should pursue. For example, if a family pursues harmony as their goal, an approach that relies on aggressive business growth may pose a threat to harmony because growth typically reduces the level of dividend pay-out that otherwise could be used to organize family meetings or maintain an elevated lifestyle Pieper et al. (2013).

A carefully chosen intervention methodology should be associated with the objectives and strategy of the possessing family. In the intervening time, countertransference, and equivalent procedure analysis Sullivan (2002) may be beneficial procedures for families in business. When used properly, these procedures permit counsellors and researchers to practice and observe family business forces at work in their collaborations with the family business structure. These experiences and interpretations can then be used as supplementary information points contributing to an improved consideration and generating change in the family, business, or both Pieper et al. (2013). Overlooking these developments (be it consciously or unconsciously) can endanger the intervention and may even exacerbate the dysfunctional forces at work in the business Pieper et al. (2013), Sullivan (2002).

The descriptions defined here characterize collective conflicts concluding from the reciprocated impact of family and business. Individuals functioning with business families are well recommended to identify the case, diagnose the problem, and intervene in ways that are beneficial to the health of the family and the success of the business Pieper et al. (2013).

From time to time, this is a serious balance to attack, and in some unhealthy or pathological cases, the family business cannot be saved. In these cases, therapists and consultants in the same way need to motivate individuals to detach from the business and seek an extensive range of occasions outside the family business Pieper et al. (2013).

2.4. COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Communication has been recommended as a variable in some succession models Dyck et al. (2002), Handler (1994), Sharma et al. (2003b) but not as a central construct, and it is not included in many of the conceptual models used to explain succession Cabrera-Suare et al. (2001), Breton-Miller et al. (2004), Sharma et al. (2003a). Communication among family members is barely recognized in Breton-Miller et al. (2004), assessment of the succession literature. Botero et al. (2013) recognized only four articles on succession and communication. Communication plays an important role in business succession De et al. (2010), Schröder et al. (2011), Sharma et al. (2001), but it is not clearly defined or measured in succession situations. It is observed as a substitute to communication Dyck et al. (2002), shared vision De et al. (2010), mature relationships Barach and Ganitsky (1995), or as one out of several scopes of relational competency Hatak and Roessi (2013), Michael-Tsabari and Weiss (2013).

2.5. SUCCESSION

Succession describes "the actions and events that lead to the transition of leadership from one family member to another Bizri (2015), To be successful, succession must be considered a long-term process, not a single event Collins et al. (2016). When examined as a determinant of generational continuity, succession involves the advancement of family employees over non-family employees Bozer et al. (2017). As Helin and Jabri (2015) explained, succession is an emotionally complex process in FOBs, as it encompasses family relations, identities, and future success. Succession is a dominant challenge for family-owned businesses, with only 30% surviving transfers to second generations, and 15% surviving into third generations Alwis (2016). A large study of nearly 300 FOBs revealed that succession was a significant barrier to continued success Chua et al. (2003). The high rate of failure among FOBs has prompted a wide range of investigation into the causes Bizri

(2015), and research indicates that a predominant reason most family-owned businesses fail to survive across generations is poor succession planning Alwis (2016). According to Breton-Miller et al. (2004), successful succession describes "subsequent positive performance of the firm and ultimately the viability of the business" (p. 306). Early researchers described succession in FOBs as a long-term socialization process that occurred within businesses through life-long learning experiences Longenecker and Schoen (1978). Despite an expanding body of literature on cross-generational survival of FOBs, many issues with succession remain Collins et al. (2016).

2.6. SUCCESSION PLANNING

Because successful succession is one of the greatest challenges plaguing FOBs, planning for succession is critical to the survival of these businesses. Despite the known challenges of succession, FOBs often fail to have clear succession plans or processes for implementing those plans Fang et al. (2015). Although family members work closely daily, conversations about succession are often avoided Lam (2011). Succession planning is often postponed by incumbents because of negative feelings associated with the idea of no longer having control over an FOB Collins et al. (2016). An incumbent's concerns and anxieties about succession can cause them to delay or even sabotage succession plans Sharma and Irving (2005). Even when planned for, families often find succession plans to be very difficult to implement Lam (2011).

Succession planning comprises distinct phases, including initiation, integration, joint control, and withdraw Collins et al. (2016). Succession processes that are drawn out over a long period of time are often more successful than those that take place quickly Collins et al. (2016). Importantly, succession planning is not the only essential element of the successful transfer of FOBs. Research indicates that succession processes must also be consistent with family values Distelberg and Blow (2010), Santiago (2000). Succession within FOBs is complicated by the social interplay between family members, weak leadership pipelines, and business considerations Bozer et al. (2017). As Decker, Heinrichs, Jaskiewicz, and Rau (2017) explained, additional factors can complicate succession in FOBs, including contextual factors (family, organizational, and individual), consideration of various stakeholders, and the considerable time that succession requires. Family-owned businesses that have demonstrated successful succession often share key characteristics, including strong relationships between incumbents and successors, successors with experience in subordinate roles outside of the business, the gradual assumption of leadership by successors, strong organizational culture, and a successor's commitment to the success of the business Cabrera-Suarez (2005).

Bozer et al. (2017) described four key protagonists who play a role in FOB succession, including the incumbent, the successor, family members, and non-family members. The incumbent is the individual who holds the senior leadership position within an FOB and will relinquish control to a successor. The successor is the individual who assumes leadership after an incumbent step down. Family members are employees of the FOB who are family members. As Frank et al. (2016) explained, family members share core family values and aspirations, which are advanced through strategic goals and daily activities. Finally, non-family members are employees of the FOB who are not family members but possess valuable skills and experience that family employees may not have. Bozer et al. (2017) developed a list of personal and professional variables that affect succession within FOBs. Personal factors include attitudes, cultural shadow, mortality, nepotism and ethnicity,

commitment, gender, age, family culture, family history, and work/family conflict. Professional factors included leadership style, fairness and justice, family-business structure, education/experience, nurturing, and credibility. The researchers noted that as an FOB grows, succession planning becomes increasingly essential to survival. The factors presented by Bozer et al. (2017) largely echo the important succession factors presented by Collins et al. (2016), including an incumbent's anxiety about failure of the business (mortality), an incumbent's ability to trust a successor, an incumbent's openness to new ideas, and the quality of relationships between incumbents and successors during and after succession.

Ghee et al. (2015) also examined factors that can influence succession in FOBs. First, the researchers explained that relationships between family and non-family employees can create issues, as can insufficiently trust and communication between family-member employees. Family-conflicts such as sibling rivalries and jealousy can weaken important relationships and affect the stability of businesses. Common impediments to the relationships between family members and non-family members in FOBs include poor communication, inadequate trust, turmoil, jealousy and resentment, and a lack of loyalty. Ghee et al. (2015) also found that family values and beliefs can significantly influence the success of FOBs, as these factors determine the culture of a business. Certain values, such as openness and integrity, can foster the growth and sustainability of FOBs. Finally, Ghee et al. (2015) pointed out that effective successor training is essential to successful generational transitions in FOBs. It is critical that successors are trained and provided with the necessary skills to take over and manage the business. Essential factors of successor training include formal education, work experience, training, number of years working with the firm, and perceptions of preparedness.

One of the most important factors in successful succession within FOBs is communication. Conversations that strengthen relationships between family members may be even more important to succession than a successor's education or experience Janjuha-Jivraj and Woods (2002). Kim et al. (2018) argued that successful succession rests on four key factors: employee support, shared values, expectations for continued success, and successor characteristics. First, employees must support a successor for a succession to work. If employees and successors disagree, conflicts and breakdowns in daily operations can occur. Employees' support of a successor can result in their support for a succession decision, as well as trust in successors. Shared values describe the values shared by members of on organization. Successors and employees must share common values for succession to work. Expectations for continued success and profitability describe how strongly stakeholders trust successors to be able to successfully run and grow the business. Finally, successor characteristics describe the preparation of a successor to lead a business, as well as the individual's organizational commitment, abilities, skills, and experience.

2.7. INCUMBENTS/SUCCESSORS

Business owners often struggle to think about handing the control of their businesses over to a successor, which results in the suspension of succession planning. Owners of FOBs may be reluctant to plan for succession out of fears that ownership changes will hamper the prosperity of the business Cabrera-Suarez et al. (2001), Miller et al. (2003), Putney and Sinkin (2009). Such concerns among incumbents can hamper the progress of succession planning or interrupt implemented succession plans Sharma and Irving (2005), Ward (1987). Successor-incumbent relationship dyads have been considered by previous researchers Collins et al. (2016), Longenecker and Schoen (1975),Longenecker and Schoen (1978),

Howorth, Westhead, & Wright, 2004). According to Collins et al. (2016) and Sharma et al. (2003a) successors and incumbents often view succession differently. Shared conviction and collaboration between incumbents and successors are essential to successful succession Collins et al. (2016), Venter et al. (2005). Similarly, the continuous contribution of antecedents outside a realistic time declines successor decision Mitchell et al. (2009), diminishes successor gratification with the development Chua et al. (2003), and increases the conflict within family business (Davis & Harveston, 2001; De Massis, Chua & Chrisman, 2008).

Family businesses are unusually reliant upon owners as single decision-makers within the business (Feltham, Feltham, & Barnett, 2005); therefore, the principal role of an incumbent throughout the succession procedure is that of a mentor to the successor (Cadieux, 2007). Incumbent CEOs experience strong bonds concerning their business. Intrinsically, incumbent CEOs may perhaps need to carry on functioning as an active participant of the leadership team of the business, or at a minimum act as a mentor to guarantee the successor has the suitable education to take full advantage of the probabilities for a smooth changeover. As Ghee et al. (2015), second generation successors are likely to possess more education and adaptability to competitive environments and new technologies than their incumbents, but the knowledge they gain from formal education may be inadequate for growing an FOB.

3. METHODOLOGY

Personal contacts with gatekeepers at the selected FOSBs, were leveraged during the recruitment process. An email invitation was sent to a gatekeeper at each organization. To indicate organizational consent, I requested that the gatekeeper provide written indications of consent from leaders. To be eligible to participate in interviews, individuals had to be at least 18 years old, a current employee of the participating FOSBs, and have worked there for at least 2 years. A minimum employment history of 2 years with the organizations helped ensure each participant possessed the experience required to provide data needed to answer the research questions. Nine participants were recruited, that included a mix of leaders and employees. All nine individuals, three leaders and six employees, participated in the interviews which were conducted virtually, via telephone meetings. Data were transcribed and member check process was conducted. An interview protocol designed for this study was used to collect data. Two experts in the field of small business reviewed the protocol for content validity.

3.1. CODING AND ANALYSIS

Analysis for this study involved the procedures for thematic analysis that were described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis involves the repeated review of qualitative data to identify and analyse patterns that emerge. The process of coding involved identifying repeated ideas or words, developing a code to identify the repetition, and assigning it to each occurrence in the data. I performed two passes through each transcript to ensure all codes were identified and assigned. Next, I combined codes into themes and subthemes. To do this, I combined codes into groups based on similarities between them. Any codes that did not seem to align with the research question were removed, and very similar codes were combined. As I developed the themes and subthemes, I kept the research questions in mind to ensure the analysis was carefully aligned with the goal of the research. I generated a thematic map to help me visually organize the data after which I compared the themes and subthemes against the study's theoretical framework,

which was based on Ajzen (1991) theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The aim of this step was to ensure my analysis was not only aligned with the research question, but also the theoretical framework. Subsequently, succinct definitions for each theme and subtheme were created.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The process of coding involved identifying repeated ideas or words, developing a code to identify the repetition, and assigning it to each occurrence in the data. Two passes were performed through each transcript to ensure all codes were identified and assigned. The initial list of codes to emerge are listed in Table 1.

After reviewing the research question and problem statement once more, the codes *incumbent passed away* and *outsider* were removed from the list of codes. Although they did repeat in the data, they did not directly relate to the focus of my study. A frequency table was created to calculate the frequency of each code across the dataset as shown in Table 2. This process allowed for identifying the codes that were most prominent.

Table 1 Initial Codes

Trust/integrity	succession planning is important	get job done
Including incumbent	separate personal life	respect
conflict occurs in FOBs	successor possessed most knowledge	power struggle
experience	share knowledge	bite the bullet
in for the money	desire to see business survive	passion
deference to successor	customers' perception of succession	agreement
successor stepped up	succession can cause failure	teamwork
communication	incumbent passed away	customer first
chain of command	succession tension	timelines
role clarity	customer first	listening
no conflict	address issues quickly	outsider
cloud decisions	livelihood depends on success	hard worker
	in it for the money	

Table 2 Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Employees' perceptions and their communication styles determine FOSBs' succession strategies		Successor possessed most knowledge Deference to successor Successor stepped up Experience
The nature of succession depends on communication	Agreeable communication	Communication Agreement Teamwork Meeting Listening Address issues quickly
	Knowledge sharing	Possess knowledge Share knowledge
FOSB foster succession through keeping customers happy and succession planning	Keep customers happy	Customers first Customers' perceptions of succession
	Succession planning	Succession planning is important Including incumbent Role clarity Chain of command
Succession challenges that leaders and employees encounter in FOSBs	Conflict	Conflict occurs in FOBs Power struggle Cloud decisions Succession can cause failure Succession tension Timeliness No conflict

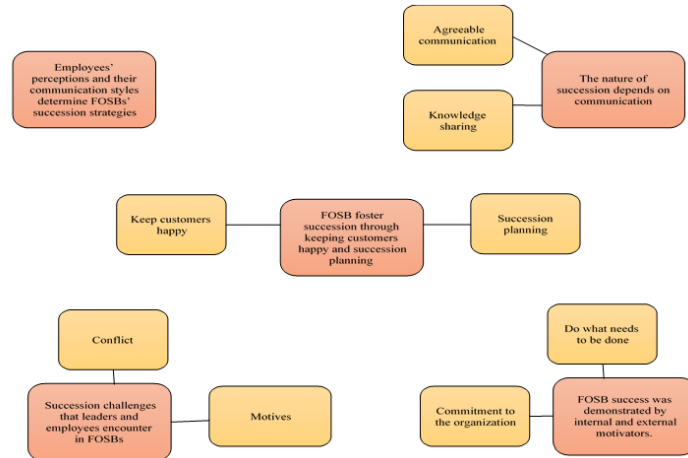|	Motives	In it for the money
FOSB success was demonstrated by internal and external motivators.	Do what needs to be done	Get job done Hard work Bite the bullet
	Commitment to the organization	Desire to see business survive Livelihood depends on success

Figure 1 Thematic Map

4.1. THEMATIC RESULTS

The research question guiding this study asked what strategies are used by employees and leaders of family-owned small businesses (FOSBs) to manage succession and related conflicts. A total of five main themes emerged (see Figure 1), including *Employees' perceptions and their communication styles determine FOSBs' succession strategies, the nature of succession depends on communication, FOSB fostered succession through keeping customers happy and succession planning, Succession challenges that leaders and employees encounter in FOSBs,* and *FOSB success was demonstrated by internal and external motivators.* Eight subthemes emerged, including *keep customers happy, agreeable communication, succession planning, knowledge sharing, conflict, motives, do what needs to be done,* and *commitment to organization.*

Employees' Perceptions and their communication styles determine FOSB succession strategies

The first theme to emerge from this study related to how employees' perceptions and communication affected succession strategies. This theme related to other employees' views of the successor as competent, experienced, knowledgeable, communicable, and most eligible to assume leadership within the organization. One of the most prominent codes to emerge from the data, *successor possessed most knowledge*, related to this theme. Essentially, participants across all three organizations agreed the selected successors were most suited to the position because of their knowledge and experience. Participants also viewed the successor as similar to the incumbent and motivated to step into the leadership role. Among participants, there was a strong sense of respect for the successors of their respective companies. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, indicating there was probably never any real competition for the successor roles, as everyone in the families agreed about who was most qualified to lead. Tight family bonds and respect for one another were probably essential aspects of these FOSBs,

which made succession relatively seamless and successful. Perceptions of successors were agreeable because they were perceived as most experienced.

The nature of succession depends on communication

The second theme to emerge from the data was *the nature of succession depends on communication.* This theme emphasized the importance of communication amongst employees and leaders, in successful succession. Two subthemes related to this theme, including *agreeable communication* and *knowledge sharing.* Agreeable communication amongst staff was a factor that seemed to foster successful succession among the participating FOSBs. Throughout the interviews, the importance of open, agreeable communication and teamwork were emphasized. Importantly, listening was mentioned as an essential component of agreeable communication. Agreement in terms of successor selection was also an important part of agreeable communication. Knowledge sharing emphasized the way participants possessed and shared knowledge with one another, which helped create succession success. Knowledge-sharing helped ensure employees were always on the same page, in terms of how the business would be run. Creating a culture of knowledge-sharing also fostered open, agreeable communication, which certainly nurtured organizational success.

Throughout the interviews, the sentiment of knowledge-sharing was strong. There was never an indication that employees withheld information from one another. Rather, the spirit was one of teamwork, in which employees were willing to not only jump in and help as needed but were also happy to teach or advise one another on how to handle different aspects of the business. A culture of knowledge-sharing helped ensure everyone was on the same page, reducing the likelihood of confusion or miscommunication, especially during the succession process.

FOSB Foster Succession through Keeping Customers happy and succession Planning

The third theme to emerge was *FOSBs foster succession through keeping customers happy and succession planning.* This theme emphasized the importance of satisfied customers and succession planning as strategies to keep businesses viable through succession. Two subthemes related to this theme included *keep customers happy* and *succession planning.* The idea of keeping customers happy was woven throughout the interviews. Participants understood customers were the lifeblood of their organizations; without customers, they would have no business. Thus, when asked about conflict management and succession, responses first went back to the very basics of keeping customers happy. Keeping customers pleased was considered the most essential aspect of keeping a business afloat, no matter the situation.

This sentiment illustrated that workers were aware customer confidence could drop during succession, so they took proactive steps to keep confidence high and prevent customers from taking their business to other companies. The second subtheme to emerge was *succession planning.* The importance of succession planning was emphasized by seven of the participants. They acknowledged that even the best laid plans can fail, and that successful succession depended on having some kind of order set up. When asked the best way to avoid succession-related conflict in FOSBs, respondents emphasized the importance of flexibility in succession plans. However, it also emerged that succession should be planned for well ahead of time, in the event of an emergency, and that everyone in the company should understand the plan. This sentiment helped illustrate the closeness and respect among family members working in this FOSB, which was very likely to foster a relatively smooth and successful transition of leadership.

Succession planning also involved having a clear chain of command in place when the succession occurred, and for everyone within that chain to understand their roles and responsibilities. While some participants emphasized an established chain of command as essential to smooth transition, others described hierarchies within FOSBs as potential culprits of conflict. Indeed, if hierarchal structures create power struggles and defiance, this is a potential point of contention that FOSBs must be aware of. Along with understanding everyone's level within an organization, succession conflict in FOSBs can be avoided by making sure everyone understands their individual roles and responsibilities within the company.

Succession challenges that leaders and employees encounter in FOSBs

The fourth theme to emerge from the data was *succession challenges that leaders and employees encounter in FOSBs.* Two subthemes emerged for this theme, including *conflict* and *motives.* Participants agreed that conflict was often inherent to FOSBs. Interestingly, while five of the participants believed their organizations faced no conflicts when dealing with succession, they admitted FOSBs are more likely to experience conflict than are other small businesses. While some participants acknowledged the importance of assessing, understanding, and dealing with conflict, they also felt that too much time spent dealing with conflict could be counterproductive. That is, giving ample time and energy to conflict management could take away from the essential activities of the business. In this way, most participants felt that sometimes workers just needed to compromise, let conflicts ease, and get on with business. This strategy is more likely to work in FOSBs that are tight-knit and consist of high levels of respect amongst employees. Participants also described how power struggles related to succession could contribute to business conflict. Conflict can arise when family members battle with each other over control or money, or when they jockey to move up an organization's hierarchy. Most participants echoed this sentiment, describing how desire for money and control can create major conflicts for FOSBs. The persistent tardiness of workers after a FOSB succession may occur because employees believe they can *get away with it.* Participants were also aware that succession had the potential to destroy FOSBs.

A business motive that all participants agreed could lead to conflict in FOSBs was focusing solely on money. The code, *in it for the money* appeared eight times in the data. Participants emphasized that a FOSB could not survive if the workers were solely there to make money. They acknowledged that financial success was critical to business survival and believed that passion for the organization and a desire to help others should supersede desires for financial gain. As evidenced in other subthemes, participants seemed to de-emphasize the importance of money, favouring instead ideals such as passion, hard work, and putting customers first. Most participants pointed out that money conflicts can also occur when family members expect pay increases after a succession. Shared core values around money are likely to bond family members and create smoother succession.

FOSB Success was demonstrated by Internal and external motivators

The final theme to emerge for this study was *FOSB success was demonstrated by internal and external motivators,* which described factors that contributed to company success through succession. Two subthemes emerged for this theme, including *do what needs to be done* and *commitment to organization.* There was a strong sentiment of *doing what needed to be done* in order for the companies to experience success. This attitude seemed to be a cultural trait of the organizations – one in which workers joined together and worked hard to get things done. Participants mentioned the importance of getting jobs done quickly and efficiently. Getting jobs done usually required hard work, and sometimes required undesirable

compromise. The second subtheme to emerge for this theme was *commitment to organization.* Overall, there was a strong sense of organizational commitment expressed by all participants. Workers desired to see the businesses thrive, and they also acknowledged that business success was essential to their livelihoods. There was a collective desire for the businesses to succeed, which helped workers to discuss and overcome any conflicts within the companies. Finally, workers were committed to the organization because they knew their livelihoods depended on the companies' success.

5. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Participants stressed the importance of putting the business first and keeping customers happy. They explained that without customers, there would be no business. Internal conflicts seemed to always be viewed as secondary to the functions of conducting business and satisfying customers. All participants had positive perceptions of the successors for their respective organizations, agreeing the selected individuals were the most suited for the position due to their knowledge and experience. No conflicts regarding the decision of who would become successor were detected in the study data. It is worth noting that in one of the FOBs, the incumbent did not step down, but fell ill and passed away. Because of this situation of succession, conflicts between the incumbent and successor were not present. As the incumbent grew ill, family members still tried to include him on decisions and seek his advice, even though it was not really needed. These behaviours revealed employees' deep respect for the incumbent, as well as their abilities to work together throughout a process that not only involved succession, but also mourning a loss.

In another FOB, a clear succession plan was not laid out because the succession was unexpected; however, varying degrees of planning were present for two FOBs. The lack of detailed succession planning that emerged from participant interviews is typical for FOSBs. Although planning is essential to successful succession, FOSBs often fail to develop clear succession plans Fang et al. (2015). Family members work closely daily, but conversations about succession are often avoided because of the discomfort involved Lam (2011). Even when succession is planned for, successful implementation of succession plans is rare in FOSBs Lam (2011).

Despite the lack of detailed succession plans, it seemed that the process of succession occurred with relative ease at all three participating FOSBs. Often, owners of FOBs are reluctant to plan for succession for fears that ownership changes will hamper the prosperity or success of the business Cabrera-Suarez et al. (2001), Miller et al. (2003), Putney and Sinkin (2009). Successful succession in FOBs is typically characterized by strong relationships between incumbents and successors, successors with experience in subordinate roles outside of the business, the gradual assumption of leadership by successors, strong organizational culture, and a successor's commitment to the success of the business Cabrera-Suarez (2005).

Despite the lack of detailed succession plans at the participating FOSBs, the process of succession proceeded with little conflict. It is likely that the agreeable communication, teamwork, and knowledge-sharing woven into the organizational culture helped supplant the succession conflicts typical in FOSBs. Indeed, when examining the common causes of conflict in FOBs described by Harvey et al. (1998), the success strategies that emerged in the current study could be used to directly circumvent common conflicts. For example, one of sources of conflict mentioned by Harvey et al. was communication. Poor communication, distortion of communication, and misunderstandings can create significant conflict in FOSBs. However, findings from the current study suggested that workers had open,

friendly, honest, and transparent communication. Succession is a dominant challenge for FOBs, with only 30% surviving transfers to second generations, and 15% surviving into third generations Alwis (2016). To understand strategies used by participants to foster succession success, it was essential to understand the actual challenges faced by the participating FOSBs. Succession conflicts are one of the three distinctive types of conflict within FOBs Caputo et al. (2018).

Participants were aware that FOSBs are particularly prone to conflict, especially when work and personal lives intermingle. Previous researchers have emphasized the host of issues that can make conflict particularly pervasive in FOBs Corbetta and Salvato (2012), Ghee et al. (2015), Levinson (1971). However, participants in the current study also seemed more interested in working toward business goals and keeping customers happy than focusing on resolving conflict. This was an interesting sentiment; one may expect the lack of attention to conflict resolution to result in greater conflict within the organization. However, overall conflict at the participating FOSBs was low. It was as if employees were able to shift their attention to "getting work done" rather than dwelling on conflict – in doing so, a sense of teamwork was generated, communication was emphasized, and conflicts seemed to fizzle out.

A lack of agreement and common focus on business goals can lead to conflict in FOSBs Ghee et al. (2015), because participants in this study all seemed focused on common business goals, these factors were not sources of conflict for them. Further, focusing on common business goals may have helped workers overcome conflict that would be problematic in a more disjointed family business structure. While this strategy for conflict resolution – that is, focusing on work over addressing conflict – is not really a strategy at all, it highlights the tight bonds between family members and illustrates how important close relationships are to avoiding and overcoming conflict in FOSBs. These behaviours also highlight how task-conflicts (disagreements or varied viewpoints that occur over the allocation of resources, procedures, and policies, or how investments should be made; De et al. (2004) were not really an issue at three of the participating FOBs.

One of the CEOs was adamant about the importance of separating personal and business life to avoid conflict; this point has been stressed by previous researchers. For example, Kotlar and Massis (2013) reported that FOBs are more prone to conflict because family-related conflicts that occur outside of the business are often brought into the business. It is often difficult for workers in FOBs to separate business from their personal lives Trippe and Baumoel (2015). Caputo et al. (2018) described FOBs as "fertile grounds for conflict" because of copresence of family/personal goals and business/financial goals.

Common business motives that emphasized purpose, passion, and hard work, superseded financial motives among participants. Many participants mentioned the importance of not focusing solely on financial gain, explaining that purely financial motives could lead to conflict. This common value of passion and hard work seemed to bond family members and shift the focus to working together for the sake of the businesses, rather than competing with one another for money or power. Indeed, many of the conflict sources in FOSBs reported by previous researchers did not seem to be present in the participating FOSBs. Corbetta and Salvato (2012) explained that conflict can arise from several factors, including: (a) nepotism, (b) co-opting unqualified family members into leadership positions, (c) infighting caused by strains to relationships between family members, and (d) conflicts between family and non-family employees; none of these factors were revealed in the interviews. Challenges such as power conflict or financial motives were negated by motivators such as getting work done and demonstrating affective commitment to

the organization. Traits of passion, trust, integrity, and hard work caused workers to rally around common goals and fostered a strong organizational culture that emphasized teamwork. Participants did not discuss any specific strategies to motivate success; rather, these factors seemed to just be foundational values that were likely instilled by the incumbents and family bonds that existed outside of the businesses.

Previous research emphasized the importance of teamwork and common goals for helping FOBs thrive and overcome common conflicts Miller and Breton-Miller (2005), Nicholson, 2008; Pieper et al. (2013). Family-owned businesses can create a meaningful purpose to stay together as a family, which may permit family members to put hostilities to the side and work together to find solutions that promote the viability of the business and thereby allows the family to overcome conflicts Pieper et al. (2013). Previous researchers have also reported how differences in personality among family members can create conflict. Antecedents of conflict described by Wall and Callister (1995) included individual characteristics (i.e., personality, goals, values, commitment to position, anger, stress, and desire for autonomy) and interpersonal factors (i.e., beliefs about another's intention, communication, and behaviour). Common perspectives and goals among employees along with the low occurrence of conflict, suggested that culture and shared beliefs/attitudes may be particularly fundamental to preventing succession-related conflicts in FOSBs.

5.1. LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of this investigation was that it relied on information provided through participant interviews. Although confidentiality was provided to all participants and organizations, it is possible that participants censored their responses during interviews to avoid saying things that family members may have disapproved. To help overcome this potential limitation, I ensured confidentiality and did not share any quotes or details that could have been negatively perceived by family members. Because this study was qualitative in nature, findings are not generalizable to other samples or to the larger population of FOSBs. It is also important to mention the data collection limitations created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of social distancing mandates, I was unable to meet with participants to conduct the interviews in-person, as originally intended. Instead, data collection took place over the phone, preventing me from capturing non-verbal communications that I would have been able to detect in-person. None of the organizations had documents related to their succession planning, which could be thematically analysed and compared to interview data. any such documentation. Although this was unexpected, the lack of document analysis must be accepted as a limitation of the current investigation. Even without document analysis, saturation was indicated in the interview data, supporting trustworthiness of findings.

5.2. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study offer several practical implications, which I have developed into the following list of recommendations. These strategies, when employed within FOSBs undergoing succession, may help to circumvent common succession challenges experienced in these organizations. Because families may create businesses for a variety of reasons, such as providing income and jobs to family members, sources of identity, and reputation Danes et al. (1999), Olson et al. (2003), Pieper et al. (2013), it is essential that intervention strategies to reduce succession-related conflicts consider the unique structure, goals, and challenges

faced by a particular business. The recommendations that follow provide broad suggestions that FOSBs may adopt and tailor to their unique circumstances.

Focus on Building Family Bonds. Strong bonds between family members in FOSBs may foster communication, teamwork, agreeableness, and a spirit of collaboration. Such characteristics may help FOSBs overcome common sources of succession-related conflict, such as power struggles and hostility.

Emphasize Non-Financial Goals. Participants in the current research placed strong emphasis on non-financial goals. Although they all understood economic prosperity was essential to the success of the business, more value was directed toward keeping customers happy, conducting honest and transparent business, and putting in hard work to achieve business goals. This emphasis on non-financial goals naturally fostered the economic success of the businesses, but also seemed to create a glue that bonded family members together. This bond can be a powerful antecedent to common sources of conflict in FOSBs, including those related to succession.

Select Successors Who Have Earned the Respect of Family Members. Workers in this study expressed a high level of respect for the successors at their respective organizations. There was a collective agreement that the selected individuals were the best suited to take over leadership of the businesses. Family members agreed that the successors possessed the most knowledge and experience, making them most suited as successors. Accordingly, power struggles, disagreement, jealousy, and competition that are common causes of conflict in FOSB succession were not present during the transfer of leadership at the participating FOSBs.

Separate Work and Personal Lives. Previous research has emphasized the importance of separating work and personal lives. The blurring of the line between business and personal is a common cause of conflict in FOSBs, including succession conflict. As such, leaders of FOSBs need to create strategies to help family members distinguish business from their personal lives, so they may focus solely on business while at work.

Emphasize Communication and Knowledge-Sharing. A final practical recommendation to emerge from this study involves emphasizing communication and knowledge-sharing among workers in FOSBs. Participants in the study discussed amicable, open communication that emphasized knowledge-sharing. This culture of communication and knowledge-sharing fostered a sense of teamwork and connectedness that was likely instrumental in successful succession, even in the absence of a clearly defined succession plan.

5.3. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The framework for this study was based on Ajzen (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB). The TPB Ajzen (1991) purports that an individual's intention to engage in a behavior is the result of three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms surrounding the behavior, and perceived behavioral control. Because intentions may be the strongest predictor of behaviors Krueger and Carsrud (1993), the TPB Ajzen (1991) provides a valuable foundation for examining succession intentions. Without observing behaviors, intentions offer valuable insights into the actual behaviors that individuals will subsequently perform Krueger and Carsrud (1993). According to the TPB, behaviors are influenced by (a) the attractiveness of the expected outcomes, (b) the suitability of the conclusions of the reference group, and (c) the originator's awareness that the behavior will result in expected outcomes.

The TPB is comprised of five concepts that cooperatively characterize an individual's definite control over a behavior.

1) **Attitude toward the behavior:** The degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a behavior. It entails a consideration of the outcomes for a behavior. Study participants demonstrated favorable attitudes toward succession, business success, and each other. A strong respect for one another and a collective desire to see the business continue to thrive after succession created positive attitudes toward succession. Attitudes were also very positive toward the successors; no ill-will, hostility, or jealousy was detected. Rather, family members viewed successors as capable and agreed they were the best suited to take over the businesses. As such, the collective favourable attitude toward business succession and prosperity increased the intention to achieve successful succession. The *attitudes* construct of the TPB was reflected in the theme, *FOSB success was demonstrated by internal and external motivators.* The subthemes of this theme, which emphasized doing what needed to be done and commitment to the organization, reflected positive and committed attitudes. In turn, these positive and committed attitudes resulted in behaviors that helped reduce conflict and ensure successful succession.

2) **Subjective norms:** Beliefs about whether most people approve or disapprove of a behavior. Subjective norms relate to individuals' beliefs about whether others endorse a behavior. Subjective norms are determined by perceptions of normative beliefs and one's motivation to comply with those beliefs. The subjective norms of the groups were deeply embedded in an organizational culture that emphasized respect, trust, transparency, and helpfulness. The norms at the participating FOSBs seemed to consist of factors that would naturally help organizations circumvent common succession-related conflicts, such as struggles for power or jealousy. Participants were aware of how their family members/co-workers would perceive and respond to their behaviours, and they acted in accordance with what subjective norms encouraged. Perceived hierarchy and the normative belief that control of a business should be passed down to the individual with the most experience and knowledge helped reduce possible succession-related conflict. In addition, subjective norms regarding customers' expectations and desire for business survival seemed to help participants band together during succession. The *subjective norms* construct was reflected in the theme, *the nature of succession depends on communication.* Norms about communication and how participants perceived others to expect them to communicate and behave influenced their communication. As such, participants described helpful and agreeable communication that involved knowledge sharing. The perception that others expected them to communicate agreeably created a subjective norm around communication that helped foster succession success.

3) **Perceived behavioural control:** An individual's perceptions of the ease or difficulty associated with performing a behaviour. Perceived behavioural control varies across situations and actions. This construct of the theory was added later and created the shift from the TRA to the TPB. Interview data revealed very little perceived difficulty over controlling behaviours that would foster successful succession. The major points that were made, such as emphasis on open communication, agreeableness, hard work, and putting the customer first, were all discussed as natural elements of the businesses that everyone worked toward, as a team. None of the comments made suggested that great difficulties were perceived in performing behaviours

essential to succession. The *perceived behavioural control* construct was reflected in the theme, *FOSB foster succession through keeping customers happy and success planning.* Actions to ensure customers were satisfied and that succession plans were in place reflected participants perceptions of control over their own behaviours. By intentionally behaving in ways that led to succession planning and happy customers, succession took place with fewer challenges.

4) ***Behavioural intention***: The motivational factors that influence a given behaviour, in that the stronger the intention to perform a behaviour, the more likely the behaviour will be performed. Behavioural intentions to achieve successful succession was strong, as there was a significant collective motivation for the businesses to succeed after succession. Participants demonstrated a sense of duty toward the businesses and their legacies, and they also acknowledged the businesses were an important part of their livelihoods. These factors increased intentions to behave in ways that would foster succession success. B*ehavioural intentions* construct was reflected in the theme, *Employees' perceptions and their communication styles determine FOSBs' succession strategies.* The perception of the importance of communication for fostering success within the FOSB resulted in behavioural intentions related to communication. Participants understood the ways they communicated with family members had the potential to either create or thwart conflict. As such, it became a behavioural intention to engage in helpful, clear communication.

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