Spotlight
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Can a strong spiritual bond be the secret ingredient to a thriving family business?

A qualitative study reveals how one family's Catholic faith shaped three generations of leadership

FRANCESCO BARBERA · HENRY X. SHI · ANKIT AGARWAL · MARK EDWARDS

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The influence of faith on business decisions is a topic most management research avoids. Family business scholarship is no exception. Yet for many multigenerational firms, religious or spiritual values sit at the core of how the family thinks about leadership, succession, responsibility to employees, and engagement with the community. The question is not whether these values exist—it is how they move from private belief to organizational practice.

Francesco Barbera, Henry X. Shi, Ankit Agarwal, and Mark Edwards explored this process through an in-depth qualitative study of the Kiolbassa Provision Company (KPC), a family-owned sausage business in Texas founded in 1949. Through eight interviews spanning three generations, the authors traced how the family's Catholic faith shaped intergenerational solidarity, leadership behavior, and the firm's organizational culture. The result is a process model that explains how religious values are transmitted from individual conviction to business-wide practice.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The Kiolbassa family provided an ideal case: openly devout, publicly expressive of their faith, and actively preparing a fourth generation to lead the company. The researchers used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to unpack personal narratives and family experiences, combining two theoretical lenses. Intergenerational Solidarity Theory explains the emotional, normative, and structural bonds between family generations. Values-Based Leadership Theory shows how ethical convictions shape leadership behavior and organizational outcomes. Together, these frameworks allowed the authors to trace a clear path from individual belief to collective action.

KEY INSIGHTS

Faith builds the emotional infrastructure for succession

The Kiolbassa family's shared religious practice—regular prayer, church involvement, shared rituals—created an unusually strong sense of emotional closeness and normative alignment across generations. This matters because intergenerational solidarity is one of the best predictors of successful succession in family firms. When a family shares a moral framework, disagreements about strategy or leadership are filtered through a common set of values rather than escalating into identity conflicts.

Even during crisis—such as the death of the family patriarch—prayer functioned as a unifying force that reaffirmed collective identity. The solidarity was not incidental. It was actively cultivated through decades of shared spiritual practice.

Religious values translate directly into leadership style

The family's leaders exhibited humility, selflessness, and a strong moral code—traits the researchers linked to values of benevolence, tradition, and conformity. Decision-making was consensus-based and trust-oriented. The third-generation CEO described the family philosophy simply: your word is your bond. Leadership was framed as stewardship rather than ownership, and this framing shaped everything from how the CEO engaged with employees to how the family handled disagreements about the firm's direction.

From private belief to company culture

The most interesting finding is that the family's religious values did not remain within the family. They became embedded in the firm's formal culture—its mission statement, management practices, and customer policies. KPC operated with open-book management, above-average wages, loyalty to long-serving staff, and a money-back guarantee that symbolized the family's commitment to integrity. These were not branding exercises. They were direct expressions of the family's convictions about how people should be treated.

The family also extended its values outward through philanthropy and community engagement. Giving was understood as a moral obligation, not a marketing strategy.

TAKEAWAYS

For business families with shared values

If your family shares a strong ethical or spiritual framework, treat it as a strategic asset. Invest in the rituals, conversations, and practices that keep those values alive across generations. Codify them—in mission statements, governance documents, or family constitutions—so that they survive the transition from one generation to the next. The Kiolbassa case shows that values can drive alignment, employee loyalty, customer trust, and community goodwill, but only when they are actively practiced rather than passively inherited.

For advisors and consultants

Do not underestimate the role of faith or moral conviction in how a family business operates. When advising family firms on governance, succession, or culture, ask about the values that hold the family together. These may be the most important assets the family has—and the most fragile.

A word of caution

The authors acknowledge a risk: excessive conformity. When shared values become so dominant that dissent is suppressed, innovation can suffer and groupthink can set in. Families should monitor the balance between cohesion and critical thinking, especially as new generations bring different perspectives and experiences to the table.

IMPACT

Barbera, Shi, Agarwal, and Edwards make a contribution that is both conceptual and practical. Their process model traces a clear path: individual religious conviction strengthens intergenerational solidarity, which in turn supports values-based leadership, which then shapes organizational culture and stakeholder relationships. Each link in the chain is supported by the case evidence, and each is potentially applicable beyond the religious context. Any family firm rooted in shared moral or ethical commitments can use this framework to understand how values move from the family to the firm—and where that transmission might break down.

The study also opens a door that family business research has been slow to walk through. Religion and spirituality remain taboo topics in much of management scholarship. This paper demonstrates that ignoring them means ignoring one of the most powerful forces shaping how some families lead, govern, and sustain their enterprises across generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Cultivate shared values early:** Use rituals, storytelling, and role modeling to transmit core beliefs from one generation to the next. Start before the succession conversation begins.
2. **Make values visible:** Document them in mission statements, governance charters, or onboarding materials so that they shape the firm's culture beyond the family circle.
3. **Align practices with beliefs:** Design hiring, compensation, and customer policies that reflect the family's core principles. Consistency between values and actions builds trust.
4. **Watch for conformity traps:** Encourage healthy dissent within the family and the firm. Shared values should guide decisions, not silence alternative viewpoints.

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CEFEO AUTHORS

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