

Fifteen years on, has the practice lens revealed where family business strategy really happens?

Thirty-four studies show the practice perspective reframes succession and strategy, yet remains underused.

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Ask a business family where its strategy gets made and the honest answer is rarely the boardroom. It happens on the drive to a supplier, in a phone call between siblings, or over a Sunday lunch where a daughter mentions that she might like to run the export side one day. Most research never sees these moments. It surveys the chief executive, counts the board seats and models outcomes from large databases.

In 2010, Mattias Nordqvist and Leif Melin used the first issue of a new journal devoted to family business strategy to propose another route. Drawing on the emerging strategy-as-practice movement, they argued that researchers should treat strategy as something people do, and follow who does it, where, and with what consequences. They called the idea promising because, in their view, almost nothing had yet happened.

A new study returns to that promise fifteen years later. Its verdict is sobering, and its ideas about where to look next matter as much to owners and advisors as to academics.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The study combines three elements. First comes a 71-minute conversation, held in Swedish in April 2024, with Leif Melin, one of the founders of the strategy-as-practice field. He arrived with tea, binders and old notes. His account runs from strategy process research in the 1970s, through a 1990 workshop series on managerial cognition with colleagues in Lancaster and Lyon, to a 2003 special issue on micro strategizing and

the 2007 book that fixed the field's name. Melin and Ann Langley had wanted "micro" and "strategizing" in that title. They lost.

Second, the researchers ran a systematic review. A Scopus search pairing family business terms with practice theory terms returned 50 hits. Twenty-six were discarded, some because "SAP" referred to enterprise software, others because it meant the sap inside tree trunks. Snowballing added ten sources that databases miss, including books and doctoral theses. The final sample held 34 contributions published between 2003 and 2026, 22 of them journal articles.

Third, the authors turned what they found into a research agenda of six themes and 17 questions.

KEY INSIGHTS

The promise was only partly kept

Thirty-four contributions in more than two decades is a thin harvest for a perspective pitched as a fresh way of seeing family firms. Growth stayed slow until about 2021, then quickened. All four doctoral dissertations in the sample came from Jönköping International Business School, where the conversation began, and most journal articles appeared in entrepreneurship journals rather than family business ones.

Melin's explanation is frank. Practice research demands deep qualitative work, and many scholars would rather analyse numbers from databases. Even qualitative studies often stop short of examining practice closely. For a field that once set out to co-create knowledge with business families, this drift

carries a cost: much of what we know about family firm strategy comes from people who never watched it being made.

Where the lens was used, succession looked different

Succession is the clearest example. Conventional research treats it as a planned transfer from one regime to the next. Practice studies describe something far less intentional, an ongoing process woven into everyday family life that shapes the next generation whether or not anyone designs it. One study traced how successors were formed through family cooking, analysing accounts in three cookbooks. Another, covering seven cases from China, Germany, Sweden, England, Tanzania, Israel and the United States, found a plurality of succession practices shaped by socio-cultural context.

For families, the implication is uncomfortable and useful. If succession is already happening at the dinner table, the formal plan is only part of the story, and perhaps the smaller part.

Strategy lives in informal arenas

Early Swedish dissertations showed how trust, respect and ownership shape strategising through everyday interaction. A longitudinal study of 31 small family-owned grocery shops in India documented how informally their strategy was made. Melin sees value in following parallel arenas, such as the family council, the management team and the board, without separating formal from informal.

Gender, grief and entrepreneurship come into focus

Practice research has examined how 20 Italian daughters negotiated legitimacy when taking over family firms, how 51 women entrepreneurs in West Africa's Adja community enacted business identities through daily routines, how next-generation members in two Mexican family firms pursued external ventures, and how families cope after a founder dies. These are small studies. Together they reach emotional and relational territory that surveys rarely touch.

The family business itself becomes harder to pin down

This is the most provocative argument in the paper. A widely cited definition of the family business assumes a dominant family coalition pursuing a shared vision. The well-known three-circle model separates family, business and ownership into overlapping categories. Practice studies suggest a reality that is subtler and far more fluid, where those categories bleed into one another and the "shared" vision is often assembled on the fly. The authors stop short of proposing a replacement model, arguing that practice-based models would complement existing ones. They also take aim at research that treats family business merely

as a setting, which they describe as context offered as an apology.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESS LEADERS

Know where your strategy is really made

Melin's suggested starting point is to look at issues, actors and arenas together. Most families can name their formal forums. Fewer can say which conversations in the car, the kitchen or the corridor actually shift decisions.

- List the places where strategic issues were raised in the past year, formal or not.
- Note who was present, and who was missing, especially non-family managers.
- Ask which arena carried the decisive conversation.

Treat succession as already underway

Children absorb the business long before any plan names them. What they see at home about work, risk and responsibility is part of succession, so parents who want a deliberate process should pay attention to the unintended one too.

Listen to the family's language and history

Melin highlights discourse and lived history: the words a family uses about its business, and sources beyond formal records. Letters between a mother and a child who chose a different career can say more about legacy than any annual report.

IMPACT

The agenda groups its 17 research questions into six themes: everyday strategy work, family relations and gender, succession as everyday practice, ownership as something people do, strategy without formal planning, and history and legacy as living experience. Among the questions: who practises strategy when anyone can be a strategist, how next-generation members become successors through daily life, and what competences responsible owners need.

The authors propose a special issue in a family business journal to galvanise the work, and invite strategy-as-practice scholars, ideally teamed with family business specialists, into the field. Family firms are among the most widespread forms of enterprise in the world, so the empirical opportunity is large.

Practitioners stand to gain most. Research built on years of observation produces insights that families recognise, because it describes how they actually work. Advisors who rely only on governance templates and succession checklists risk designing for a family that exists on paper.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Run an arena audit.** Once a year, map where strategic issues surfaced and who shaped them, then decide which informal conversations deserve a formal home.
2. **Ask the forgotten question.** Melin suggests asking what the strategic issues actually are. Families often assume they know; writing them down and comparing lists across generations is revealing.
3. **Bring non-family managers into informal strategy.** If real decisions happen over dinner, non-family executives are excluded by default, with consequences for their engagement and for the quality of decisions.
4. **Preserve informal history.** Keep letters, recipes, photographs and stories alongside formal archives, since they carry the family's values and its logic of ownership.
5. **For advisors, observe before prescribing.** Time spent shadowing a family's routines will often reveal more than a governance questionnaire.
6. **For researchers, go deep.** A qualitative method alone is not enough; the practice perspective rewards long engagement with families and close attention to what they do.

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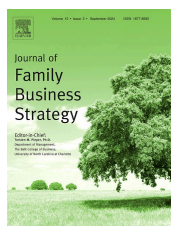
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