GESTALT THEORY, DOI 10.2478/gth-2026-0020
© 2025 (ISSN 2519-5808); Vol. 47, No. 2-3, 349–361

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Generational Change as a Timeless Innovation Engine in Family Businesses: A Morphological Perspective on Change Stories

Conservative. Inflexible. Backward

At times, the public paints a picture of family businesses as preserving their successful strategies of the past at the expense of innovation, or as reacting too slowly to change due to a strongly patriarchal structure. It therefore seems unsurprising that the question of how family businesses can keep pace with (digital) change and engage with the challenges of our fast-moving age has been discussed frequently and with great intensity (for example: Wimmer et al., 2018).

However, if long-standing family businesses are taken into consideration, it is precisely their durability that seems to be the best proof of their adaptability to social and economic developments. Companies that have been family-run for several generations demonstrate in an impressive way that they can successfully overcome even severe crises, such as radical upheavals in politics and society, global economic crises, (world) wars and pandemics. Even in contrast to non-family businesses they have a great capability to survive external influences (for example discussed in relation to the concept of organisational resilience, in: Bauweraerts, 2016).

Particularly impressive are the successes of centuries-old family businesses, such as that of the oldest family business in the world: the Japanese Houshi Ryokan, which was founded in the Middle Ages, in 717, and has now been hold in the family for 46 generations (Guinness World Records, n.d.). With this in mind, it is conceivable that the long-term success of family businesses is largely related to the fact that they keep management firmly within the entrepreneurial family and successfully manage generational change at regular intervals.

Gestalt psychological model of change processes

From a gestalt psychological perspective, reference can be made here to Kurt Lewin's model of change (1947/2012), which depicts a successful change process in three phases. The first phase involves loosening fixed structures and patterns. This is a prerequisite for the second phase, in which the structure is moved to a new level. At this new level, its structure is finally solidified again (Lewin, 1947/2012, pp. 262-263). If Lewin's change model (1947/2012) is followed and applied to an organisational context, generational change can be understood less as a mere change of the managing director and much more as a fundamental transformation of family businesses. It describes a structural and thus cross-personal development.

From the perspective of morphological psychology, stories organise this kind of change process, because they embody specific psychological patterns of formation and transformation (Fitzek, 2009; Salber, 1999/2018). From a morphological perspective, stories that have become established in companies and are passed down through generations can therefore provide an answer to the question of how family businesses manage generational change. In the following, the morphological understanding of change stories will be approached, which also has conceptual similarities to narrative theory.

Narrative theory: stories reconstruct experiences of change

In theoretical terms, narratives are considered to be meaningful stories that recount the past and, usually, a change in order to reconstruct it from a present perspective and make it understandable (Straub, 2020). As Straub (2020) points out, the concept of narration is fundamentally anchored in qualitative narrative theory and research and was initiated by several scholars in psychological disciplines.

One founder of narrative theory is the psychologist Jerome Bruner (1915-2016), who emphasised the importance of storytelling for human experience and behaviour. According to Bruner (1997, 1999) storytelling leads to identity formation and a narrativisation of one's own life. People construct reality with narrated stories, especially with autobiographies, and receive a (linguistic) medium to create meaning and significance (Bruner, 1999). In this process, the actions of individual narratives are never shaped by coincidence or consist of rational and verifiable assumptions. Instead, the values, ideas and desires of the narrator are expressed in them, making stories reminiscent of composed narratives. They are about how people deal with reality, where they locate obstacles and problems, how they overcome them or how they fail because of them (Bruner, 1999).

What is striking are those narratives that deal with *turning points* and tell of when and how a conviction or attitude has changed (Bruner, 1999, pp. 17-19). For Bruner (1999) it is precisely these turning points that represent the moment of becoming aware of one's own life narrative (p.18). In addition, they pave the way for trying out other ways of living and establishing a new narrative structure.

The identification of narratives is nowadays no longer only used to reconstruct and understand individual life stories but is also increasingly used in organisational context: the assumption that stories create meaning and significance is transferred to the understanding of companies and is therefore also of central importance for the exercise of leadership and management tasks (Chlopczyk, 2017).

As Chlopczyk (2017) points out, the concept of *the story telling organisation* describes the creation of meaning and the construction of reality as a dynamic process of a collective. Through stories employees, managers but also customers and the public shape the image of a company. He further states, that narratives enable professionals and leaders to put their everyday experiences and events into a structured and ordered context. They are therefore not only characteristic of a company's self-image, but they also contribute to organisations remaining capable of acting in complex situations (Chlopczyk, 2017).

According to Chlopczyk (2017) narratives have the essential psychological function of providing stability and security. They give people an orientation in their daily work and enable them to evaluate and interpret certain actions and events from the past. However, organisations' narratives do not merely address the past and tell of the turning points that led to the current state. As Chlopczyk (2017) further explains, they also enable a constant reshaping and reorientation of the future. Especially during change processes and transformation, great importance is attached to stories that focus on the future, as they establish a common understanding of development (Chlopczyk, 2017, pp. 32-33).

Narratives in family businesses

Arist von Schlippe and Torsten Groth (2007) have investigated the specific function of narratives in family businesses and highlighted that they characterise them more than other types of businesses. This is particularly related to the structural overlap and close ties between the (entrepreneurial) family, the company and, where applicable, external shareholders. According to von Schlippe and Groth (2007) the complexity of a family business can only be dealt successfully if all those involved are always willing to put their own interests aside for the good of the family business (p. 32).

In this context, storytelling plays an important role. As von Schlippe and Groth (2007) point out, it combines the logic and interests of a family with those of a company and shareholders and thus transmits significant knowledge and possibilities of how a structural balance can be established in concrete terms. Stories that have become established in family businesses mainly revolve around the attitudes of individual actors and the way they deal with each other (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, pp. 32-33). Typical narratives describe, for example, that business interests always take precedence or that family members should adapt to the demands of the business in terms of their life and career planning (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, p. 33).

The meaning- and identity-creating function of narratives is particularly significant in family businesses (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, pp. 36-37). This is characterised by the narrated attachment of employees and family members to the company, whereby their narrative style provides information about how great their identification is (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, p. 37). Additionally, stories make a significant contribution to making the respective corporate culture of a family business tangible. In this regard, it is characteristic that the narrated values of the company correspond first and foremost to family values. According to von Schlippe and Groth (2007) stories often focus on the time when the company was founded and the unique role of the founders (pp. 36-37). Typical are stories that include descriptions of their exceptional personality, tireless energy, persistence, and diligence. They are central and highly significant in the collective construction of a corporate identity (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, pp. 36-37).

In addition, narratives are formed, becoming integral features of a family business' life story (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, p. 38). They address conflicts and crises that have been overcome and are therefore of such high relevance because they leave a lasting mark. For example, generations later, people still tell how a dispute escalated, which decision-makers were responsible for economic setbacks or who saved the company from ruin (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007, p. 38).

According to Bruner's narrative theory (1999) such typical narratives mark turning points that make the life story of a family business understandable. Indeed, von Schlippe and Groth (2007) also describe that family businesses equip themselves with a \`story-based´ memory over the years, through which they can fall back on selected narratives that point the way to future developments (p. 34). More than with other types of businesses, the future viability of family businesses depends on which stories are told and how they are told (von Schlippe & Groth, 2007).

An empirical study at the Witten Institute for Family Business (WIFU) investigated which stories have become established in long-lived family businesses and how entrepreneurial families tell of having survived crises in the past that threatened their existence as well as the need to adapt to environmental conditions (Kleve et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Specific narratives of long-lasting family businesses

In a qualitative study, researchers interviewed representatives from families of long-lived businesses. The interviews of the four oldest family businesses surveyed were analysed to identify narratives typical of the self-narrative of their centuries-old life story (Kleve et al., 2022b). The \`youngest´ company considered is currently held by the 11th family generation, the oldest by the 21st (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 178). In total, the research team differentiated 12 guiding narratives, which are presented in three central categories (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 180). The characteristic of the identified guiding narratives is that they frame the theme of *survivability* and narratively reconstruct past crisis experiences, as well as their coping strategies (Kleve et al., 2022a).

The first category includes guiding narratives that represent the *attitude* of a family business and illustrate its self-narrated identity (Kleve et al., 2022b, pp. 180-181). The values conveyed in these narratives are of great relevance, as they play a pivotal role in fostering cohesion within the family business (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 180). These include, as already presented by Arist von Schlippe and Torsten Groth (2007), stories that deal with family values and are narratively often linked to the personality of the founder. Above all, the fact that these values have been recounted over and over again gives a sense of *magnitude*, to which both family members and employees contribute equally (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 180). Furthermore, this category includes stories that present the degree of self-determination of an entrepreneurial family (Kleve et al., 2022b, pp. 180-181). For family members, the resilience of their company to crises is related mainly to the fact that the family holds the majority of shares. This is the only way they have been able to push through important decisions in the company's interests, which were quite contrary to the interests of outside shareholders (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 181). Following this, stories are told in long-lived family businesses that praise their own staying power and allow entrepreneurial families to look to the future both calmly and optimistically. It is striking, however, that entrepreneurial families strongly select their stories. They mainly refer to success stories, which do indeed reveal experiences of crisis, but which have been mastered throughout - accounts of failure are often hidden (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 181).

In the category of *familiarity,* the identified guiding narratives target the relationships within the entrepreneurial family (Kleve et al., 2022b, pp. 181-182). Narratively, family cohesion is important for the preservation of a family business. The selective choice of stories can also be found in this category: stories on familiarity tell of numerous conflicts and disagreements, but the family members involved always realised they had to overcome them for the success of the business (Kleve et al., 2022b, pp. 181-182). This is also helped by a narrative that seems almost outdated in today's world but is quite typical for the self-image of entrepreneurial families (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 182). As an integral part of a historical business, entrepreneurial families feel more committed to traditional family and gender images than other families, as they fulfill the function of social security in the entrepreneurial context. To avoid the risk of prolonged negotiations among individual family members regarding their roles, these roles are predetermined right from the beginning through the adoption of conservative patterns (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 182). In addition to this, stories also revolve around the strong will to pass on the business within the family. Kleve et al. (2022b) point out, that in the past, long-lived businesses have preferred to accept economic setbacks and sit out times of crisis rather than pass the business out of family hands (p. 182). They attach the greatest importance to a highly qualified successor from their own family ranks, for whom they provide the best possible education and training (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 182).

In the third identified category, the story content is about *entrepreneurship* (Kleve et al., 2022b, pp. 182-183). Narratives frame central entrepreneurial perspectives and strategic orientations that provide the family business with security to react to unexpected events. In this category, too, direct references to the stories identified by Arist von Schlippe and Torsten Groth (2007) become clear. A guiding narrative revolves around the *"Business-First-Strategy"*, according to which family life must always be subordinate to the company (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 183). Stories according to which the company must always be one step ahead of its environment are also concise. Narratives tell of how entrepreneurial families have reacted flexibly to changes in the market in times past. This includes, for example, business areas that were abandoned just in time because they were no longer viable (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 183). Other stories, on the other hand, focus on unconventional paths and the ingenious behaviour of the entrepreneurial family, which made innovations possible in the first place and which promoted the existence of family businesses (Kleve et al., 2022b, p. 183).

Essential to the *survival stories* (Kleve et al., 2022a) in family businesses is the fact that, starting with the founding generation, they have endured until today. Accordingly, they have been handed down to a new age of the business with each generational change that has taken place and transferred to the present (Kleve et al., 2022a, p. 347). The shaping of a generational change is undoubtedly characteristic of the life history and survival of family businesses. Although the Witten Institute for Family Business research highlights its function as a fundamental narrative of long-lived family businesses, due to its fundamental importance for their life story, it requires complementary and more in-depth consideration. The question arises as to which stories family businesses use to tell such a specific form of change processes.

Generational change as a unique change narrative of family businesses

Jacques Chlopczyk (2017) has highlighted the function of meaningful stories in dealing with change processes (pp. 36-42). In this context, "Change-Stories" can be understood as an independent form of narratives that provide an interpretative framework for change processes (Chlopczyk, 2017, p. 40). He points out that they primarily serve to sensitise the organisation to the necessity of change and to make it understandable for all those involved. To this end, change stories also highlight the respective roles and responsibilities of different actors, which are either narrated directly or resonate between the lines (Chlopczyk, 2017, p. 40).

Based on the understanding of change narratives generational change can be understood as a unique change narrative of family businesses. It seems to epitomise the fact that it will continue to exist in the future and thus not only narrates the core of its (long-lasting) existence but also allows a family business to establish specific ways of dealing with social and digital changes. This assertion, which forms the basis of my thesis, will be explored further in the subsequent discussion of my empirical research.

Morphological research: stories about generational change

In my current research, which I am conducting as part of my Ph.D. dissertation at the Faculty of Human Sciences at the University of Cologne under Prof. Dr. Herbert Fitzek, I am investigating the image of generational change in family businesses and its psychological effect. In accordance with the theoretical and methodological assumptions of morphological psychology, I have examined generational change as an impact unit (Fitzek, 2008, 2020, 2022; Salber, 2007). This conceptualisation makes it possible to explore generational change as a fundamental and characteristic meaning structure in family businesses and to capture both conscious and unconscious logics in human experience and behavior. One methodological objective of my research is to describe the meanings in stories about generational change, which I collected in the form of morphological in-depth interviews (for further information, see Fitzek, 1999, 2008, 2020, 2022).

From January 2021 to December 2022, I conducted in-depth interviews in equal proportions with senior and junior managing directors, as well as employees from family businesses. The sample includes 30 family businesses from different sectors and with different lifespans. While some businesses look back on a short past and are on the verge of the first generational change, the oldest are already being leaded by the fifth generation. The family businesses under consideration also differ in number of employees. The smallest company is a father-son business, while the largest company employs around 1,500 people. Since I always interviewed one perspective from each family business, my analysis is based on the material from 30 morphological in-depth interviews. In doing so, I was able to determine two directions, how family businesses speak the change narrative of generational change and what psychological function it performs for dealing with transformation.

(1) Generational change tells the beginning of a new age

In the interviews it emerges that the idea of transformation in family businesses is (almost automatically) linked to generational change. It is told as a classic leadership theme, whereby the question of who will continue to run the company in the future seems to be decided from the outset: the children of the entrepreneurial family. In this context, the handover of leadership to the next generation is often narrated as a clear point in time to which all events in the family business converge. In narrative terms, a generational change marks the beginning of a new and, above all, progressive era in the family business, in which the old is quite symbolically replaced by the young. What is striking about this kind of story is that the entrepreneurial family is mainly made responsible for the implementation of a generational change. Senior and junior managing directors are supposed to act primarily and vicariously for the entire company and exemplify a way of dealing with change. In this context, a typical understanding of the roles of a senior and a junior generation can be identified, which runs like a red thread through the stories.

For the most part, the junior generation is portrayed as the key driver of innovation, bringing the company into a modern age. Successors bring a breath of fresh air into the company and provide a new impetus in everyday work, which is narratively mainly brought together with large investments. In the interviews, managing directors and employees typically talk about the fact that with a leadership takeover, new equipment and software are purchased, new products are added to the range and processes are optimised so that the company can serve current trends. Also discussed are innovative methods and approaches to leadership that junior managing directors know from their studies and from which they expect added value for their own company. In this context, the stories told about generational change usually convey optimism and anticipation of what the future holds under a young leadership. However, alongside the consciously expressed drive for innovation, there is also a tendency among family businesses to show reservations about change, appearing to slow down its implementation.

Narratively, this countercurrent is often framed in the role of senior managing director entrusted with preserving the success of the past. In particular, the values that have significantly shaped it since its foundation and that are embodied by the entrepreneurial family should continue to form the core of its existence in the future. In the stories, the family represents a kind of unshakeable foundation that holds the company together and promises security. It should also convey beyond the leadership handover that the family business is still the same and delivers the usual quality. To ensure this, the main task of a senior managing director is to point her or his successor in the *right* direction and to pass on as much experience as possible. In this context, stories are repeatedly told about how the junior generation first must painstakingly learn to bear the responsibility of a leader to be allowed to make their own decisions at all. Stories are also characteristic according to which a successor must hold back with suggestions and ideas until *her/his* time has come.

Ultimately, in this narrative logic, a junior managing director only receives the necessary decision-making rights to implement her or his own ideas, try out new things and initiate changes, when she or he takes over the leadership tasks. In some cases, it is even reported that senior managing directors hold the reins so tightly in their hands that they remain in the role of preserver far beyond the generational change. The concrete beginning of a new, innovative age is then difficult to identify. It is much more likely that a narrative style sets in with which the establishment of something new is postponed to an indefinite time in the future. For family businesses this increasingly involves the tendency to slow themselves down narratively and to keep the already existing innovative power of a young generation warm. In its strongest form, it makes a family business appear obsolete in comparison to other businesses, or, to use the metaphor of a managing director I interviewed, like a *dinosaur*.

It can be stated that the narrative of generational change as the beginning of a new age can sooner or later lead to problems in which the classic understanding of the leadership roles of a junior and senior generation offers potential for conflict.

In the interviews, however, another way of looking at and telling the story of generational change emerges that provides an answer to this problem and can relieve the burden on cooperation in family businesses. This second narrative of generational change broadly resonates between the lines of the narrated stories and thus appears rather behind the scenes. In its basic structure, however, it can be described very well.

(2) Generational change tells a perpetual process of innovation

In the stories about generational change, a narrative style can be identified according to which family businesses recognise the problems of the first narrative themselves and try to counteract them. In this context, managing directors and employees tell stories about how it is too risky to wait for a generational change and let the process run its course until the formal handover of leadership. Their stories reflect a kind of collective willingness to deal with the change process and the impending challenges well in advance. They strive to be proactive and prepare themselves for the process so that it does not catch anyone unprepared in the actual implementation.

The stories suggest that the *entire* family business is committed to the process of renewal and is (purposefully) looking for ways to practice both generational change and the transition from existing to innovative structures across the hierarchy. This endeavour is framed, on the one hand, when managing directors and employees tell of everyday situations in which an old and a young generation work together and negotiate a constructive way of dealing with their conflicting expectations. In addition, stories can be found that deal with the establishment of innovations and convey different ways of keeping them in line with the tradition of the family business. One such form of practice is presented, for example, by telling the story of working students or young professionals who join the company and bring in their knowledge from their studies with conviction but are quickly confronted with the traditional processes of the company that stand in the way of their plans. How the family business negotiates such a confrontation gives managing directors and employees a concrete idea of how similar conflict situations can be resolved in a formal business handover.

Suppose one follows such stories of family businesses, one can find almost innumerable opportunities in everyday work to try out and (collectively) practise ways of dealing with the formal generational change. Managing directors and employees can explicitly deal with the transition from old to young and the establishment of innovations every day and across all hierarchical levels. In the stories, there is then often a narrative change of perspective, according to which a family business stages and manages a generational change on a small scale every day. The second narrative thus enables a narrative redefinition of generational change. Members of a family business no longer see it as the *one* point in time that heralds a new era and is inevitably linked to a company succession. Rather, it can be understood as a timeless moment that literally becomes the permanent task of family businesses and, as a necessary consequence, even softens the classic understanding of the roles of a senior and junior generation.

In contrast to narrative 1, the responsibility for a successful transition can no longer be shifted to two individual actors. The narratives make people aware that *everyone* is responsible for its success, and in this context appeal not to cling to the differences of individual generations or those between managing directors and employees. Rather, they call for attention to what connects all those involved and how they can support each other to master the change process *together*.

The second narrative also addresses this challenging aspect and tells of possibilities for implementation. On the one hand, these kinds of stories emphasise the importance of promoting an exchange across hierarchies and generations. Mentoring programmes, for example, which promote a learning culture in which young people can learn from old people, but also old people can learn from young people, have proven themselves in this regard. The stories also encourage everyone to keep up with social and technological developments. They address the fact that a family business should constantly think outside the box and invest in innovations to keep up with the times and be able to react to developments in the market. Regarding both implementation strategies, however, it is fundamentally important for family businesses to address the question of how much of the existing must be preserved and how much of the new must be allowed in order to develop sustainably.

Adaptable. Innovative. Revolutionary.

Based on the morphological understanding of generational change as a unique change narrative in family businesses, their long-lasting success is related to the narrated, but above all, *lived* change of perspective, which emphasises a lasting capacity for innovation. Consequently, the main task of family businesses is to bring and balance the flair for technical developments (of a young generation) with time-tested entrepreneurship (of a senior generation) in a continuous exchange.

By involving the young, succeeding generation in the day-to-day running of the business at an early stage and not postponing the future indefinitely, family businesses gain a decisive structural advantage over other forms of business when it comes to change processes. Family businesses gain a timeless 'young' engine that not only enables them to keep pace with (digital and social) change but also allows them to play a significant role in shaping it.

Summary

This article analyses stories with a particular focus on psychological aspects of family businesses and how they deal with transformation. In addition to Lewin's Gestalt psychological model of change, Bruner's concept of narrative theory is presented to then illustrate the specific function of narratives in (long-lived) family businesses. Based on this, generational change can be understood as an independent change narrative with which a family business can regularly organise ways of dealing with change processes. In this article, I use extracts from my current research project, which is part of my Ph.D. dissertation at the Faculty of Human Sciences at the University of Cologne under Prof. Dr. Herbert Fitzek. Based on initial morphological analyses, I present two narrative logics of stories about generational change. They illustrate how family businesses narratively frame generational change and thereby meet the quest for innovation.
Keywords: generational change, family business, morphological change stories

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die Analyse von Geschichten mit besonderem Schwerpunkt auf psychologische Aspekte von Familienunternehmen und ihrem Umgang mit Transformation gerichtet. In Ergänzung zu Lewins gestaltpsychologischem Change-Modell wird das Konzept der Narrativ-Theorie nach Bruner vorgestellt, um anschließend die spezifische Funktion von Narrativen in (langlebigen) Familienunternehmen vorzustellen. Daraus schlussfolgernd lässt sich der Generationswechsel als ein eigenständiges Change-Narrativ verstehen, mit dem ein Familienunternehmen regelmäßig Umgangsformen für Veränderungsprozesse gestalten kann. Zur Darstellung verwende

ich in diesem Beitrag Auszüge aus meinem aktuellen Forschungsprojekt, welches im Rahmen meiner Dissertation an der Humanwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität zu Köln bei Prof. Dr. Herbert Fitzek entsteht. Anhand erster morphologischer Analysen stelle ich zwei Erzähllogiken von Geschichten über den Generationswechsel vor. Sie verdeutlichen, wie Familienunternehmen den Generationswechsel erzählerisch rahmen und dabei dem Streben nach Innovation begegnen.
Schlüsselwörter: Generationswechsel, Familienunternehmen, morphologische Veränderungsgeschichten

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