

3-1997

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Recommended Citation

Habbershon, Timothy G., and Joseph H. Astrachan. "Research Note: Perceptions are Reality: How Family Meetings Lead to Collective Action." *Family Business Review* 10.1 (1997): 37-52. Print.

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Research Note

Perceptions Are Reality: How Family Meetings Lead to Collective Action

Timothy G. Habbershon, Joseph H. Astrachan

Family meetings develop family unity through the creation of perceived shared beliefs. The article presents a model with strategic implications showing how shared beliefs lead to collective action, which leads to outcomes and then the reassessment of the shared beliefs. Finally, the article reports on initial research on the reliability of instruments developed to explore one aspect of this model: The creation of shared beliefs through family meetings. The initial results suggest that perceptions of shared beliefs may be an important stimulant of collective family activity.

Introduction

Prior research and theory have identified major causes of business, family, and succession problems as family conflict (Kaye, 1991; Harvey and Evans, 1994), lack of clarity about goals and values (Tagiuri and Davis, 1992; Harris, Martinez, and Ward, 1994), and family communication and behavioral patterns that lead to misinterpreted information (Lansberg and Astrachan, 1994; Whiteside, Aronoff, and Ward, 1993). Family business practice and theory suggest that family meetings can have a beneficial effect on family involvement in the business (Ward and Aronoff, 1994; Gersick, Davis, McCollom-Hampton, and Lansberg, 1997) and that they should be the starting point for all family business planning (Ward, 1987). The implicit assumption of these two streams of thinking is that when unity about goals, desires, and actions is achieved through family meetings, it becomes the basis for positive outcomes in a family business.

In this article, we test this assumption and develop a competing theory that we adapted from Langfield-Smith's (1992) work concerning the development of shared beliefs or "collective cognitions." We posit that it is the degree to which family members believe group unity exists, rather than the actual level of group unity, that predicts, and indeed may motivate, collective behavior. This will come as no surprise to many who work with families. Families can often be observed as agreeing far more than they perceive. We further suggest that the effectiveness of family meetings is not found in simply gener-

ating consensus around a set of family beliefs, but in creating a forum for processing individual beliefs. We contend that those beliefs are reflected by their perceptions of group agreement on critical family and business issues. Through the family meeting as a “collective encounter” experience (Langfield-Smith, 1992), individual group members reassess their beliefs in the light of information and outcomes, and develop new degrees of shared beliefs through reframing and renegotiation. This in turn leads to renewed collective action.

We study the reliability of instruments developed to measure perceptions of agreement that family members have on a number of critical dimensions. These dimensions are drawn from prior theory and research and include community involvement, family, company performance, and stakeholder goals. Some initial research results are presented on how various factors seem to impact perceived family agreement, hinting at a fluidity in individual perceptions of agreement

Finally, we examine the strategic implications of this research. Our findings suggest that coordinated family action that uses new information to continually reassess and modify its thinking may lead to better performance and increase the probability of long-term family business survival. It may be that the content and actual level of agreement about shared beliefs at any given instant is not as important as both the frequency with which they are collectively reassessed, and the level of perceived agreement among family members about their beliefs. This proposition supports the aphorism that action is better than inaction.

Shared Beliefs

The concepts of shared beliefs, meanings, and sense-making have all been used to describe aspects of organizational culture (Schein, 1984; Gagliardi, 1986; Dyer, 1986). It is generally agreed that individuals within an organization must share a certain level of cultural beliefs and values if a group is to function coherently (Pfeffer, 1981, Smircich, 1983a; Trice and Beyer, 1984). However, the nature and degree of the shared beliefs necessary for collective action has been the subject of significant debate.

One theory asserts that organizations are systems of shared meanings, and that organizational action is the product of consensus among organizational participants (Van Maanen, 1979; Smircich, 1983b). Weick (1979) presents a competing theory, holding that only minimal shared understanding is required, because common ends and shared meanings are outcomes of organized action or exchange. Weick’s theory requires only the recognition of some basic agreement among the parties about their interdependence and about the means of enacting their relationship (Donellon and Bougon, 1986).

Building on the theoretical work of Weick (1979), Langfield-Smith (1992) developed a mediating theory. She finds that while groups do not maintain a consensus of shared beliefs as a basis for collective action, they do develop

“collective cognitions” that are more “. . . transitory social artifacts of the group subscribed to in varying degrees by the members of the group at a particular point in time” (p. 360). She suggests that when individuals function as members of an organizational group, there will be some overlap in the content of their individual belief systems. The degree of overlap is developed through social interaction, termed a “collective encounter.” In a family-business context, these shared beliefs could be expressed during a family meeting as they become realigned during dialog and the exchange of new information. Langfield-Smith (1992) holds that collective encounters are necessary for developing and maintaining the shared beliefs that lead to collective action.

Perceptions of Group Agreement as Shared Beliefs. Langfield-Smith (1992) developed her theory on “collective encounters” as a result of earlier work on collective cognitive maps (Langfield-Smith and Lewis, 1989). Cognitive maps are a diagrammatic representation of an individual’s beliefs about a particular domain. Collective cognitive maps are an attempt to capture and map the shared beliefs of a group, that is, the extent to which the individuals’ maps overlap. Collective cognitive maps can be ascertained by using either an aggregating method (combining the individual maps to make a group map) or a congregate, workshop method (eliciting collective beliefs from the group while they are meeting). In her workshop study, Langfield-Smith concluded that collective cognitive maps could not be established as enduring artifacts, since they can change rapidly. She stated that because of the transitory social and perhaps political nature of group belief systems, collective beliefs should be referred to as “collective cognitions.” We can see the rapidly changing nature of family beliefs clearly during a succession process, when one generation and the next are often at odds.

While we agree with Langfield-Smith’s theoretical conclusions, we believe that collective cognitions can be measured at a given point in time. We posit that because she was attempting to interactively elicit and measure individual agreement with the actual content of a belief structure, Langfield-Smith could not accurately assess the group’s sense of reality. Additionally, simply combining individuals’ levels of agreement with a defined belief may not reflect the group’s collective beliefs. Eliciting agreement on actual beliefs in emotionally charged or conflicted groups is also difficult. Conversely, as is commonly seen in some family businesses, in tightly knit or emotionally enmeshed groups, individuals might not be able to express disagreement with either the group’s long-standing beliefs, or with the beliefs of more powerful individuals or coalitions (Davis, 1950; Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1985; Cobb, 1991).

Perceived group agreement on a belief may be a better indicator of the “real” shared belief structure of groups in a relational and political context. Perceived group agreement may also be a better predictor of a group’s organizational actions, upholding the axiom that “perceptions are reality.”

The theory behind this paper is that as individual family members’ per-

ceptions of group agreement converge, it indicates that the group perceives itself as agreeing. By measuring the convergence or divergence in individual perceptions of group agreement, we can capture the collective cognitions or shared beliefs of the family at a given point in time. Collective actions of a group thus flow from its perceptions of unanimity, which is to say, from its shared belief structures.

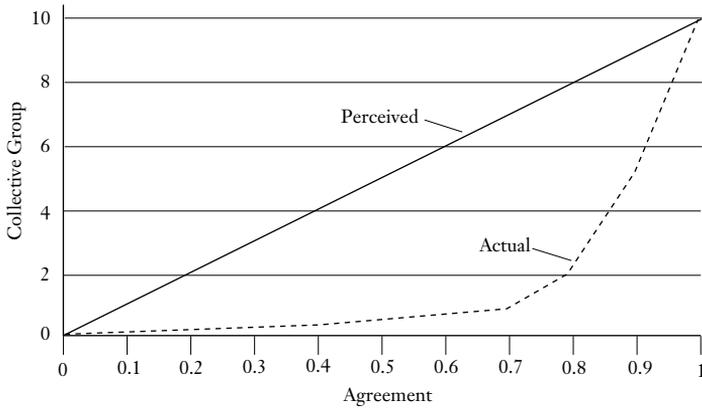
Cooperative collective action requires that members of a family believe they agree. From experience, we understand that when group members think they agree, they are more apt to trust one another's intentions. As trust increases, so does the expectation that family members' future actions will be mutually supportive. If a family member does not perceive a high level of agreement, then he or she is more likely to expect that the actions of others will interfere with their own. Consequently, that person will be less likely to act cooperatively. Furthermore, if perceived agreement is lacking, individuals may feel that the group has different or opposing goals and beliefs. These feelings may leave family members wondering whether there is a unified course of action, or, in organizational terms, whether they have a shared-belief structure. We therefore suggest that we can and should assess the collective mind of groups or families by examining group members' perceived level of group or family agreement about a belief, rather than focusing on individual agreement with the actual content of the belief.

Previous work suggests that actual agreement about clearly articulated beliefs is crucial to organizational action in a family business (Ward and Aronoff, 1994). We have noted that the actual beliefs are not as important as the perceived level of agreement on the beliefs. Though we do not test this supposition directly, we assert that actual agreement is only relevant when there is a relatively high level of perceived agreement. We have seen anecdotal evidence of this in our consulting work. We often see family members who present themselves as disagreeing—and they truly do believe they disagree—but to us as outside observers, there appears to be a great deal of actual agreement; particularly on the core values and beliefs of the group.

Because the perceptions of group members are continually shaped by the social process (Janis, 1971; Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1985), and because individual behavior follows perceptions (McGrath and MacMillan, 1992), even in groups in which core beliefs remain a stable guiding force, collective actions are born of collective individual perceptions of group unity. That is to say, perceptions of agreement mediate the collective actions that might be expected to flow from a consensus around the core beliefs.

The anticipated relation between actual group agreement and perceived group agreement and their affect on group action is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Group Action as a Function of Perceived vs. Actual Agreement



Only at high levels of perceived group agreement do we expect to see a tendency towards collective action. We also note that at high levels of actual group agreement, perceived group agreement is implicit. We can expect that collective action will increase in proportion to increases in perceived group agreement. In family businesses, organizational action and outcomes thus become a direct function of the alignment of perceptions among family members. This alignment of perceptions can result from family meetings. Building on this theoretical relation between the alignment of group members' perceptions with collective action, we present a model that suggests how family meetings lead to collective action in family businesses.

An Iterative Model for Collective Action

Figure 2 places Langfield-Smith's (1992) theory in an iterative model. The figure shows how the collective encounters generate collective cognitions that lead to collective action and systems outcomes. An essential component of this model is the iterative cycling back to the collective encounter or family meeting. System outcomes provide an opportunity for family members to evaluate the results of their beliefs and the opportunity to observe the extent to which they all pulled in the same direction. This is our first step in developing a theory that describes the function and purpose of family meetings within the family-business system. Family meetings are recurring occasions for processing transitory collective beliefs of family members. They are not simply single occasions for developing consensus around a core set of family or business beliefs.

Figure 2. An Iterative Model for Collective Action

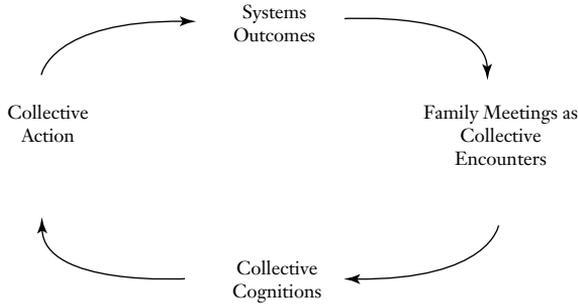
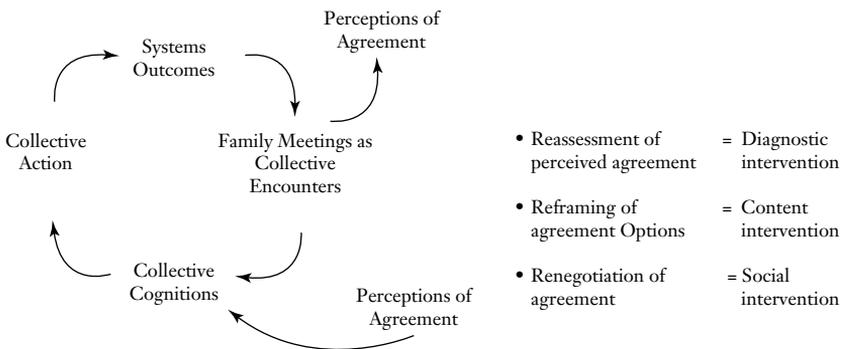


Figure 3 continues the development of the model, adding the measurement of perceptions of family agreement as the means for assessing the degree of collective cognitions. The theory behind this instrument-based (see Appendix 1) cognitive mapping is that as family members’ perceptions of group agreement converge, it is an indication that they perceive themselves as a unit. Thus, they establish their de facto degree of shared beliefs or their collective cognitions.

Measuring family members’ perceptions of group agreement at the start of a collective encounter presents the family with a benchmark of their shared beliefs. This diagnostic benchmark can then lead to renegotiation and a new perception of common beliefs. The post-encounter measurement of family members’ perceptions of agreement reflects the new collective thinking.

Figure 3. A Model of Perceptions of Family Agreement and Collective Action



The extent to which family members perceive they share beliefs can predict the extent to which they will engage in independent and collective action. The more they perceive group agreement, the more likely they are to act and to act in concert. Action begets outcomes, and the cycle repeats.

In many families and business decision-making groups, the reassessment of shared beliefs and the negotiation of new ones never occurs, even during family meetings. Normally, the group proceeds straight from system outcomes to new collective action. Often, this action is dictated by an overriding sense of the family business's cultural beliefs, or by a single powerful force, such as a patriarch who may believe that everyone in the family agrees with his or her pronouncements. In either case, the intended collective action may not reflect the group's true perceptions, which causes a breakdown in action or creates underlying systems conflict.

We propose that the development of collective cognitions and shared beliefs can occur by using family meetings as collective encounters. Figure 3 presents three types of activities that can facilitate the development of common beliefs.

The Diagnostic Intervention is designed to assess the commonly held beliefs or differences among group members. The diagnostic process is a reassessment stage, allowing family members and the group as a whole to determine their degree of perceived agreements. By having family members understand their commonalities and differences, they can readjust their individual views to be more consistent with the general group view (Hackman, 1976). The diagnostic feedback may actually facilitate the social process activity in which the individual's group identification shapes his or her perceptions of reality (Smith, 1982; Alderfer, 1977). The diagnostic instrument also allows family members to express their views on agreement, making potential "choice shifts" (Butler, 1992) without risking the social conformity constraints normally found in groups (Davis, 1950; Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1985). The diagnostic intervention adds the powerful component of individual and group awareness to the family meeting, thereby transforming it into a social process capable of realigning expectations and perceived family agreement.

The Content Intervention (e.g., family business education) allows group members to consider new belief options. This in turn creates an opportunity for reframing and gaining perspective on their agreement and disagreement. This intervention most often takes the form of an educational session in which an expert provides views on family-business life that allow group members to place themselves in a larger context of family businesses. The content intervention fulfills one of the traditional functions of family meetings (Ward, 1987; Gersick, et al., 1997). However, by creating the expectation that its purpose is to generate reframing options, it increases its social process significance.

The Social Intervention is the actual renegotiation of beliefs through dialogue. Drawing from organizational learning theory, we see dialogue as a vehicle by which individuals access a larger, collective pool of knowledge, ". . .

going beyond any one individual's understanding" and developing "... a new kind of mind which is based on common meaning" (Senge, 1990). In this dialogue, group members restate their positions and develop compromises or new solutions together. In the process, the group develops a greater sense of perceived agreement about the beliefs under consideration. The social interaction is not framed as a debate in which people try to win. Individuals are asked to suspend their assumptions while communicating them freely (Senge, 1990). The continuous re-establishment of collective cognitions creates a sustained condition for generative or "double-loop" learning (Argyris, 1982) to take place.

Table 1. Construct Operationalization

<i>Construct and Main Sources</i>	<i>Items</i>
<p>Company Performance Goals Lumpkin & Dess (1996); Hoy, Verser, & Champy (1994); Daily & Dalton (1993); Moravec (1996); Lansberg (1983); Poza (1988)</p>	<p>Overall performance goals: sales, asset growth, profitability, ROI, debt to equity, levels of innovation, R&D spending, business reinvestment, concentration/ dilution of ownership; strategic direction of business; leader selection process; leadership development programs; importance of loyalty to employees; non-family professional management roles; board of directors role; importance of non-family/non-employees on board of directors; effectiveness of company hierarchy</p>
<p>Family Goals Dyer (1986); Gersick, et al. (1997); Harvey & Evans (1994); Kaye (1991); Ward (1987); Lansberg & Astrachan (1994); Whiteside, Aronoff, & Ward (1993); Holland & Boulton (1984); Aronoff & Ward (1992); Tagiuri & Davis (1992)</p>	<p>Communication, family harmony, family togetherness goals; opportunities for future generations; importance of keeping the business in the family; importance of keeping family control of the business; family values; family mission statement; ability to challenge other views; role of in-laws; role of extended family; when to sacrifice for the business; when to sacrifice for the family</p>
<p>Community Involvement Danco & Ward (1990); Brody & Strauch (1990); Astrachan, (1988)</p>	<p>Community involvement goals: of business, of family members, community service of business; philanthropic; desired reputation of business in the community; involvement in trade and professional associations</p>
<p>Benefits to the Stakeholder Ward (1987); Monsen (1969); Murdock & Murdock (1991); Handler (1992); Schwartz & Barnes (1991); DeVisscher, Aronoff, & Ward (1995); Aronoff & Ward (1993)</p>	<p>Level of dividends; shareholder agreements; liquidity policy; entering and employment policy; promotion and advancement policy; board of directors membership policy; outside opportunities resulting from business associations; personal pride derived from association with business; involvement in shareholder decisions; knowledge necessary for stakeholders; compensation levels and policies; ownership in the next generation</p>

Combining the three interventions, the education from the content intervention, the feedback gained from the diagnostic instrument, and the interactive exchange through the social intervention, creates a synergistic interaction between content and process (Schein, 1984; Ketchen, Thomas, and McDaniel, 1996). Establishing a continuing, structured process for reassessing, reframing, and renegotiating a family’s perceptions of agreement creates a mechanism for maintaining their shared belief structure. Family meetings acknowledge that within the social context of family-business relationships, an individual’s or coalition’s shared belief structures are transitory, and that perceptions of family agreement may constantly change. As these family meetings become coupled with successful outcomes, the family-business system incrementally learns how to create the cohesiveness necessary for having efficient businesses, healthy families, and fulfilled individuals.

Methods

As a first step toward investigating the embryonic theory on family meetings, we developed a questionnaire to measure perceptions of family agreement on several goals: community involvement, family, company performance, and stakeholder. The items in the questionnaire are based on prior theory and research and the authors’ experiences with family businesses (Table 1). Questionnaire items are reproduced in Appendix 1.

To validate the instrument, we collected data from family members during three family meetings, and from 219 participants during two family-business seminars. The usable instruments totaled 132. The data were collected at the beginning of each event. Eighty-seven of the participants also completed questionnaires at the end of each event. The meetings and seminars were educational in nature and did not include family dialogue based on the assessment data.

We sought to validate each of the constructs tested by drawing on previous field work and review of the literature. Additionally, we performed a factor analysis on all items, showing Eigen values of over 1.0 for each of the constructs. Instrument reliability was further supported by calculating Chronbach coefficient alphas for each construct. All alpha coefficients were above the 0.7 level advocated by Nunnally (1978). The means and reliabilities of each scale

Table 2. Agreement Scales

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>Chronbach Alpha</i>	<i>Correlations</i>		
Community involvement goals	21.2	4.6	0.82			
Company performance goals	77.7	11.3	0.91	0.53		
Stakeholder benefit goals	56.5	10.5	0.86	0.48	0.72	
Family goals	56.1	9.2	0.76	0.55	0.47	0.55

are reported in Table 2. The scales have high reliability and correlation, giving the impression that perceived group agreement may be primarily an overall state and secondarily related to the specific goal being explored by the items.

In addition to the reliability analysis, we conducted a brief exploration into how the scales correlated with some typical explanatory variables, such as age and company size (Table 3).

Table 3. Scale Correlates*

<i>Selected Correlates</i>	<i>Company Performance Goals</i>	<i>Community Involvement Goals</i>	<i>Family Goals</i>	<i>Stakeholder Benefit Goals</i>
Revenues	-0.37			
Employees				-0.27
Family managers			0.32	
Business age	-0.15			-0.25

* only significant correlations reported ($p < .01$)

Table 3 shows that several possible explanatory variables correlate with the scales. Perceived agreement about company performance goals decreases with firm revenue size and business age. Those family members of larger, older companies perceive less overall agreement on company performance goals. This suggests that as the company grows, agreement about what the company should be doing is harder to achieve. This may be due to the increasing complexity of the company. It also indicates that as the company ages and families grow in complexity, family members perceive less agreement. In addition, perceived agreement about stakeholder benefit goals also decreases with the age the company and its size as expressed by the number of employees. Again, as the company grows in complexity and perhaps in ability to provide benefits, there is a perceived greater disagreement among family members.

The most notable finding is that as the number of family members in the business grows, perceived agreement about family goals also increases. Because more family members are working in the business, they may have more extensive common language, communication, shared experiences, and a sense of the exigencies of the business that increase their perceived group agreement. This can be interpreted as suggesting that greater family interaction increases perceived family agreement. If the rest of the model on which this research is based has validity, then this finding would suggest that greater family interaction improves the likelihood of collective family action and intended organizational outcomes.

In addition to the above analyses, repeated measures analyses of variance were conducted. These analyses indicate a significant difference among individual perceptions of family agreement for all scales between rounds one and two. This suggests that there is a change in perceived levels of family agree-

ment due to an educational intervention. We find additional support for this because there is no significant correlation among scale responses between rounds one and two.

Conclusions

This research provides initial support to the idea that perceived agreement among family members can be measured. It supports the theory concerning the impact of collective encounter (family meetings) on collective cognitions (shared beliefs) in family-business groups. The research demonstrates the reliability of scales concerning goals in community involvement, company performance, family, and stakeholder benefits. It also provides initial support to the notion that family meetings may increase perceived family agreement among family members.

The authors recognize that there are many limitations to this study. It is offered to develop theory, to stimulate discussion and further research, and to provide an instrument others might use in their work with, and research on, family businesses.

There is much research yet to be done. The effectiveness of different family meeting interventions (diagnostic, educational, and interactive) on changes in levels of perceived agreement should be a top priority. It should be a great help to those working with family businesses to have an understanding of which intervention works most effectively, and under what conditions. In addition, the model needs further exploration and testing. In this new model, long-term performance rests on the idea that perceived agreement among family members directly impacts the level of collective action and system outcomes. If this is true, it would indicate that changing agreement levels could have a great impact on business activity and perhaps family business success.

Appendix 1

AGREEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Company performance

Rate your perceived level of agreement among family stakeholders about the following issues:

(Scale is one to five, one being no agreement and five being total agreement, or not known because not discussed, or not known because I don't understand the issue, or not applicable)

- 1) Overall company performance goals
- 2) Sales goals
- 3) Asset growth goals
- 4) Profitability goals

- 5) Return on net assets goals
- 6) Return on investment goals
- 7) Debt to equity goals
- 8) Strategic direction of the business
- 9) Goals regarding level of innovation (products, processes, structures, lines of business)
- 10) Research and development spending goals
- 11) Business reinvestment goals
- 12) Process for selecting leaders
- 13) Leadership development programs
- 14) Goals for concentration/dilution of ownership
- 15) Importance of loyalty to employees
- 16) Role of professional non-family management
- 17) Role board of directors
- 18) Importance of non-family/non-employees on board of directors
- 19) Effectiveness of company hierarchy

Benefits to you as a stakeholder

Rate your perceived level of agreement among family stakeholders about the following issues:

(Scale is one to five, one being no agreement and five being total agreement, or not known because not discussed, or not known because I don't understand the issue, or not applicable)

- 1) Level of dividends
- 2) Shareholder agreements (policies about acquiring and disposing of stock)
- 3) Liquidity policy (policy around stock redemptions)
- 4) Policies about entering and employment in business
- 5) Policies about promotion and advancement in business
- 6) Policies about becoming a member of the board of directors
- 7) Level of opportunities outside of the business that arise because of your association with the business
- 8) Level of personal pride derived from association with the business
- 9) Who should be involved in shareholder decisions
- 10) To what extent should shareholders be involved in shareholder decisions
- 11) Level of knowledge and education about the business necessary for family stakeholders
- 12) Compensation levels and compensation policies for family members in the business
- 13) Plans for disposition of ownership in the next generation

Family goals

Rate your perceived level of agreement among family stakeholders about the following issues:

(Scale is one to five, one being no agreement and five being total agreement, or not known because not discussed, or not known because I don't understand the issue, or not applicable)

- 1) Communication goals
- 2) Family harmony goals
- 3) Family togetherness goals
- 4) What are the opportunities for future generations in the business
- 5) Importance of keeping the business in the family
- 6) Importance of keeping family control of the business
- 7) Family values
- 8) Family mission statement
- 9) How much one can challenge other's views
- 10) Role of in-laws in the business
- 11) Role of extended family in the business
- 12) When should family members make sacrifices for the business
- 13) When should the business be sacrificed for the benefit of family

Community involvement

Rate your perceived level of agreement among family stakeholders about the following issues:

(Scale is one to five, one being no agreement and five being total agreement, or not known because not discussed, or not known because I don't understand the issue, or not applicable)

- 1) Community involvement goals for the business
- 2) Community involvement goals for family members
- 3) Philanthropic goals
- 4) Desired reputation of the business in the community
- 5) Goals for community service for the business
- 6) Importance of involvement in relevant trade and professional associations

Company characteristics

- 1) Number of full-time employees
- 2) Approximate annual revenues
- 3) Estimated market value of business
- 4) Age of business
- 5) Number of generations involved in business since business founded
- 6) Number of family shareholders
- 7) Percentage of stock held by family

- 8) Size, in percent, of largest ownership position held by an individual family member
- 9) Number of family members in management of business
- 10) Number of family members, who are not managers, employed in business
- 11) Number of family on board of directors
- 12) Number of family on board of directors who are also employed in the business
- 13) Primary industry

Respondent characteristics

- 1) Relationship to founder
- 2) Title
- 3) Gender
- 4) Age

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