

Resistance to Change in Family SMEs: Authentic Leadership during Succession

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Abstract

Resistance to change during the succession phase presents a notable challenge within family SMEs due to entrenched traditions and historical legacies. Consequently, managing resistance to change becomes paramount for facilitating a smooth transition and ensuring business longevity. This study uses the PLS-SEM method to explore how perceived authentic leadership, organisational justice, and psychological ownership address resistance to change with a dataset of 369 valid responses from employees in family SMEs. The results suggest that, in the succession phase, employees' perception of authentic leadership can mitigate resistance to change directly and indirectly through the mediating role of organisational justice and psychological ownership. Moreover, organisational justice as a moderator diminishes resistance to change by eliminating nepotism between family and non-family members. Given the region's shared cultural values and institutional frameworks, these findings broadly apply to family SMEs in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, Organisational justice, Psychological ownership, Resistance to change, Family SMEs, Succession phase.

Introduction

Family businesses (FBs), where ownership and control are primarily within the family, play a significant role in the economy (Reina et al., 2022). In Vietnam, an important milestone for FBs occurred in 1986 with the Renovation policy, transitioning the country from a centrally planned to a market-orientated economy. With governmental support, Vietnamese family SMEs are currently surpassing other business types, accounting for 25% of the national GDP (Tran et al., 2023b). Rooted in local values and culture of Confucianism, collectivism, and Buddhism, Vietnamese family SMEs favour the transfer of leadership to family members rather than outsiders in the succession phase to maintain the family's ownership and control (Tran et al., 2023a). During this period, resistance to change (RTC) poses the main challenge as employees are accustomed to established practices and struggle to adapt to new dynamics, threatening strategic agility, organisational cohesion, and competitive position (De Groote et al., 2021; Lannon et al., 2024). In Vietnam, firm adherence to traditional success strategies prioritising stability makes this challenge more pronounced (Haveman et al., 2023; Nguyen and Vu, 2021).

Existing research has identified several antecedents that can reduce RTC in FBs. These include (1) authentic leadership (AL), which, due to the dual roles of family members and business leaders, fosters trust and transparency, thereby reducing perceived uncertainty and mitigating RTC (Zhu et al., 2023); (2) psychological ownership (PO), as familial emotions significantly influence business decisions. Employees' perception of PO can lead them to prioritise the organisation's interest over their own, thereby enhancing readiness for organisational change during the succession phase (Olckers et al., 2020; Leyer et al., 2021) and (3) perception of organisational justice (OJ) as perceived inequalities between family and non-family employees could erode trust and reduce motivation (Rehman et al., 2021). While these studies discussed the relationships between AL, OJ, PO, and RTC independently, they fail to address how these dimensions interact within the unique interplay of leadership, family dynamics, and emotional attachment in FBs. Thus, there is a need to integrate these dimensions into a cohesive framework. By doing so, this study aims to bridge this research gap by examining the interconnected roles of AL, PO, and OJ in reducing RTC during the succession phase in Vietnamese FBs.

Additionally, many studies have demonstrated that AL plays a key role in family SMEs by facilitating employee adaptation to change and mitigating RTC (Doeze Jager et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022a). However, the psychological mechanism linking AL to RTC remains unexplored, presenting an essential gap in the literature. Thus, this research expands existing knowledge by exploring the pivotal role of AL in reducing RTC through the mediating role of OJ and PO. Authentic leaders can reduce RTC by promoting OJ and mitigating nepotism, a prevalent issue in Vietnamese FBs. Furthermore, this study clarifies the previous ambiguous role of PO in the FB context, highlighting that AL positively influences PO, which, in turn, enhances employee loyalty and responsibility, ultimately reducing the negative consequences of PO-related RTC (Preciuk and Wilczyńska, 2020; Chen, 2022).

Finally, although numerous studies have examined the interplay between contextual and individual-level factors in organisational research, OJ as a moderator remains underexplored in family SMEs. This gap is significant given that the ethical dilemmas

arising from nepotism in these businesses remained unsolved. This research seeks to address this gap by integrating OJ as a contextual moderator to enhance the understanding of RTC. Furthermore, by considering this unique influence of nepotism and familial ties on organisational dynamics, the research underscores the importance of equitable working environments and authenticity in mitigating RTC, contributing to the broader discourse on change management in Vietnamese FB (Tran et al., 2023a).

Literature Review

Relationships among Perceived Authentic Leadership, Organisational Justice, and Psychological Ownership during the Succession Phase in Family SMEs

Vietnamese family SMEs feature concentrated ownership and management, with family members holding significant shares and key positions. Within this framework, informal governance, driven by family dynamics, is critical in day-to-day operations and strategic decision-making. Significantly, Vietnam's underdeveloped legal system enhances the effectiveness of these family dynamics, enabling prompt decision-making (Dinh and Calabrò, 2019).

Leadership is essential in family SMEs to drive the business forward and strengthen family bonds, especially during succession, a period often marked by disputes over power transfer between generations (Baykal, 2022). In FBs, leadership varies by generation. Founders typically lead "legitimate authority", but a collaborative approach becomes imperative as leadership transitions to the sibling generation (Fries et al., 2021).

Perceived Authentic Leadership and Psychological Ownership

Crawford et al. (2020) defined an authentic leader as an individual with high levels of self-awareness and balanced information processing, inspiring and encouraging followers through sincerity and a positive moral perspective. AL encompasses intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives (Gardner et al., 2021). The interpersonal perspective highlights connections between leaders and followers, promoting positive psychological behaviours in subordinates through self-discipline, empathy, strong values, and a passion for purpose (Malik et al., 2021). The intrapersonal perspective emphasises the self-identity and self-regulation of leaders.

PO reflects an innate sense of possessiveness towards tangible and intangible aspects (Pierce et al., 2001). In FBs, PO is strong due to the family's deep investment of effort, resources, and values. Beyond financial stakes, it encompasses closeness, loyalty, and responsibility. As ownership transitions across generations, both tangible assets (e.g., shares) and intangible assets (e.g., traditions and legacies) strengthen this sense of ownership (Preciuk and Wilczyńska, 2020).

In family SMEs, the relationship between AL and PO holds particular significance due to the closeness and loyalty between leaders and their followers. These bonds extend beyond professional interactions, shaping the dynamics of leadership and followership within the business. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of AL build credibility and respect, influencing followers' perceived PO through promotion and prevention

techniques. The perception of AL can cultivate promotion-focused PO by establishing trust and openness. Employees who perceive their leaders' commitment to personal and collective growth develop a sense of responsibility and align with the organisation's goals (Olckers et al., 2020). Similarly, the perception of AL resonates with individuals with a prevention focus by offering a sense of security, stability, and ethical guidance to avoid negative consequences and ensure a stable work environment. This approach emphasises the importance of preserving FB's reputation and ensuring its survival across generations, which enhances employees' sense of responsibility and ownership toward the business's long-term stability. Consequently, the relationship between perceived AL and PO in family SMEs is more enduring than in other organisational contexts (Baykal, 2019). Thus:

H1 The perceived AL has a significant positive relationship with perceived PO.

Perceived Authentic Leadership and Organisational Justice

According to Colquitt (2001), OJ represents the subjective perception of justice in the organisational decision-making process, encompassing the determination of various reward and punishment systems. Consequently, it comprises four key elements: distributive justice (the outcomes perceived as just), procedural justice (the perceived justice of decision-making processes and procedures), interpersonal justice (the perceived justice of individual treatment by leaders), and informational justice (the perceived justice of information provided to individuals).

Within family SMEs, gender bias in the selection of male heirs, alongside a disregard for rules of conduct and familial participation in business operations, illustrates favouritism and leads to issues of injustice (Nguyen and Vu, 2021; Samara and Paul, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). In addition, the primary responsibility of ensuring OJ rests with leaders, as they have the power to establish the norms and practices that govern fairness (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001). Consequently, the cultivation of perceived OJ in outcomes, interactions, and resource allocation is nurtured by trust based on the perception of AL. Authentic leaders are dedicated to ethical principles and integrity, fostering trust among family and non-family employees (Kyei-Poku and Yang, 2020). Thus, authentic leaders are seen as equitable, ensuring that their actions align with values of fairness and transparency.

Moreover, perceived AL fosters OJ perception by promoting a working environment where decision-makers base promotions on human capital, needs, and individual circumstances rather than solely on performance (Boekhorst, 2015). Additionally, during the succession phase, employees perceive AL as essential for addressing favouritism and injustice, as it aligns with their values and prioritises their well-being. Therefore, the perception of AL is integral to fostering organisational justice and mitigating adverse outcomes during succession, ultimately enhancing the long-term sustainability of family SMEs (Ramos et al., 2014). Thus:

H2 The perceived AL has a significant positive relationship with perceived OJ.

Resistance to Change during the Succession Phase in Family SMEs

RTC is often rooted in individuals' preference for familiarity and reluctance to take

risks when introduced to novel and unfamiliar solutions, playing a significant factor in the success or failure of changes (Ayaita and Stürmer, 2020). Negative attitudes from perceptions of injustice, job security, and loss of control typically characterise this resistance. Within the phase of succession, employees may demonstrate three types of resistance: (1) affective resistance, driven by uncertainties about the successor's competence and willingness to take charge of the FBs (Dorsch et al., 2023), intra-family conflicts (Yezza et al., 2021), and emotional attachment to traditional practices (Bertschi-Michel et al., 2020); (2) cognitive resistance arising when change conflicts with personal values (Magrelli et al., 2022); and (3) behavioural resistance manifested in the rejection of new procedures or policies (Oreg and Sverdlik, 2018).

Perceived Authentic Leadership and Resistance to Change

The framework of AL underscored specific characteristics rooted in resources from positive psychology, including self-efficacy, self-awareness, hope, and optimism, and it influenced RTC through three mechanisms. Firstly, the AL perception fosters trust among followers, especially in uncertain situations. When followers believe that their leaders are authentic, they are more inclined to trust the leaders' decisions, reducing scepticism, particularly among senior generations, hence cultivating proactive and adaptable agility to effectively respond to organisational change (Doeze Jager et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022b). Consequently, by building trust, authentic leaders mitigate RTC by encouraging acceptance and openness to new ideas and processes. Secondly, perceived AL can motivate subordinates to develop leadership skills by fostering hope and confidence among employees, thereby contributing to the improvement of organisational learning and subsequently reducing RTC (Mousa et al., 2020). Thirdly, the transparent and open relationships between leaders and subordinates will empower employees and foster their self-confidence. These relationships also make employees feel valued and understood, navigating the uncertainties associated with change initiatives, offering constructive feedback, embracing new initiatives, and contributing positively to the organisation's transformation. This sense of empowerment further reduces RTC, as employees perceive themselves as key participants in influencing the organisation's future (Neves et al., 2021). This negative relationship is more pronounced in family SMEs as successors assume the dual role of business leaders and family members. Therefore, the hypothesis is posited:

H3 The perceived AL has a significant negative relationship with RTC.

Perceived Organisational Justice and Resistance to Change

In family SMEs, increased resistance is due to the family's active involvement, which leads to a lack of transparency in decision-making, limited information sharing, and inadequate recognition of contributions. This family-centric approach can create a perception of injustice among employees and hinder their willingness to accept change. Consequently, OJ can be a strategy to diminish RTC during times of succession.

When strategy and policy changes occur, distributive justice focusing on outcomes emerges as the main factor in anticipating employees' attitudes, morality, and, ultimately, their readiness for change. Furthermore, interactional justice, centred on justice in interpersonal treatment, can generate perceived organisational support and reduce RTC (Rehman et al., 2021). Additionally, procedural justice, grounded in

processes and decision-making, is essential during succession. Formal rules and norms established by successors can provide a sense of consistency and fairness, reinforcing employee trust in the leadership process. Procedural fairness helps reduce uncertainty and the perception of favouritism, making employees more receptive to change (Zeidan and Itani, 2020). Lastly, informational justice becomes crucial in family dynamics and business strategy during succession. This informative justice involves providing clear, rational, and timely explanations regarding the reasons behind organisational changes. Transparent communication helps employees understand the necessity of changes and fosters confidence in leadership, thereby increasing their readiness to embrace new directions (De Ruiter et al., 2017). It is proposed that:

H4 The perceived OJ has a significant negative relationship with RTC.

Perceived Psychological Ownership and Resistance to Change

PO is affected by contextual circumstances (Brundin et al., 2023); hence, in family SMEs, PO is pronounced due to the considerable dedication and effort required to establish and grow the business. As ownership is passed down through generations, tangible and intangible assets contribute to developing a firm psychological contract among family members, who perceive themselves as having specific entitlements and duties within the business. This emotional bond forms the basis of a psychological agreement that generates more significant innovation outputs compared to non-FB entities (Rau et al., 2019).

Moreover, the components of PO, including self-efficacy, responsibility, the feeling of inclusion, and self-concept, shape employees' level of RTC (Avey et al., 2009). For instance, when employees interpret change from the perspectives of self-concept and self-efficacy, they are more inclined to acknowledge the importance of their expertise and skills. These components promote a readiness to adjust and relinquish old behaviours to support organisational advancement. Furthermore, employees are more willing to embrace and participate in change efforts when they feel responsible for their actions and decisions within the business. Their commitment to the organisation's long-term success drives their sense of responsibility and recognition of the need to contribute to its growth and adaptation (Arbin et al., 2021). Employees who see themselves as integral members of the organisational community are more inclined to embrace and actively participate in transformational initiatives. When individuals feel engaged and appreciated in the organisation, they are more motivated to support change efforts because they regard them as aligned with their investment in the business and its collective success (Katsaros, 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H5 The perceived PO has a significant negative relationship with RTC.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Organisational Justice and Psychological Ownership

In the context of FBs, AL serves as a prime illustration of this impartial approach by ensuring the perceived OJ of followers (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Consequently, AL acts as a channel for the perception of OJ, as followers consistently exposed to just and transparent behaviours perceive their surroundings as equitable. The perceived OJ nurtures positive organisational attitudes and behaviours, like increased organisational

commitment and a higher openness to change. Through the embodiment of fairness and integrity, the AL perception boosts followers' trust, creating an environment of psychological safety and open communication. Followers believe that changes are made with sincere intentions and for the organisation's benefit when they trust their leaders. This trust reduces uncertainty and fear, making employees more willing to embrace new initiatives rather than resist them (Doeze Jager et al., 2022). A trust created from OJ also fosters a sense of mutual respect, where followers feel valued and understood, which enhances their openness to change (Evans and Britt, 2023).

Moreover, AL strengthens employees' loyalty to the organisation by ensuring they perceive OJ in daily interactions. This loyalty enhances employees' readiness for organisational changes that align with the company's long-term goals (Abujaber, 2023). Loyal employees view change as a chance for growth rather than a threat, further strengthening their dedication to the organisation's success and reducing the likelihood of resistance (Farouk et al., 2024). Perceived AL is a justice-orientated leadership style that directly shapes the psychological atmosphere of the workplace, fostering a culture of trust, mutual respect, and adaptability while encouraging a dedicated and flexible workforce. Thus:

H6 The perceived AL-RTC relationship is mediated by OJ.

The perception of AL underscores the significance of fostering trust and transparency in aligning employees' values with the organisation. This alignment cultivates a PO among employees, who perceive a resonance between their values, mission, and objectives. When employees perceive that organisational changes align with their beliefs, priorities, and long-term goals, they view the change as beneficial rather than threatening. This alignment fosters a sense of purpose and commitment, making employees feel that the changes support the organisation's success and individual growth and well-being (Guarana and Avolio, 2022).

Moreover, providing consistent feedback by leaders reinforces trust and transparency through consistent and meaningful feedback, enhancing employees' self-efficacy, a core component of PO. Positive reinforcement from leaders enhances employees' confidence in their abilities, making them feel more capable and self-assured in their respective roles. This cycle, where aligned values and constructive feedback lead to greater self-efficacy, strengthens employees' emotional and psychological commitment to the organisation. Such commitment diminishes RTC and fosters a workforce that is more dedicated and motivated (Xu et al., 2023). On the other hand, perceived PO encourages employee involvement in their tasks, as the sense of ownership can heighten their dedication and sense of accountability, consequently leading to collaborative actions like preparedness for change (Chai et al., 2020). Ultimately, AL and PO create a robust foundation for navigating organisational transitions effectively while fostering a commitment and reducing RTC. Thus:

H7 The perceived AL-RTC relationship is mediated by perceived PO.

The Moderating Role of Perceived Organisational Justice

In FBs, decision-making is complicated due to the leader's dual role as a business and family leader. While authentic leaders strive to foster trust and transparency by

prioritising subordinates' perceptions and openly addressing concerns, the inherent family involvement can unintentionally compromise OJ (Peyton et al., 2023; Kidwell et al., 2024). Hence, the interaction between AL and OJ becomes crucial in family SMEs, highlighting the need for leaders to ensure an equitable working environment actively. By aligning ethical principles such as self-awareness and relational transparency with procedural and distributive justice of OJ, leaders can empower employees to voice their concerns freely and mitigate RTC during the succession phase (Qi et al., 2023).

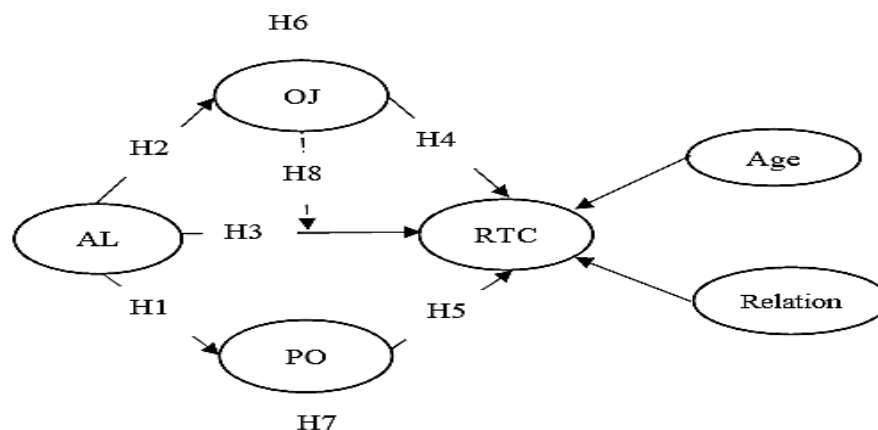
Additionally, the succession phase often triggers numerous changes, leading to heightened anxiety and uncertainty, and individuals grappling with psychological stress heavily rely on their perceptions of justice (Allen et al., 2007). Thus, creating an equitable environment where followers accept formal and informal OJ rules will influence their behaviours. Formal institutions refer to written regulations and show expected fair behaviours and outcomes, whereas informal institutions refer to appropriate norms, values, and beliefs about OJ. Under the constant impact of perceived OJ as an institutional context, the perception of AL is considered a personal resource of efficient governance to push innovation and readiness for change (Soleimanof et al., 2018). This study recognises that cultivating perceived AL helps reduce RTC. However, the effectiveness of this connection improves with the influence of perceived OJ. Thus:

H8 The negative perceived AL-RTC relationship will be more assertive with higher perceived OJ.

Socio-Demographic Controls

Including controllable variables enhances the analysis and explanatory power by managing potential confounding variables between the treatment and outcome (Hünermund and Louw, 2023). In terms of change, senior employees may struggle to change due to cognitive rigidity, and non-family employees, influenced differently by family dynamics, may show varying levels of intrinsic motivation and RTC (Elgohary and Abdelazyz, 2020; Köhn et al., 2023). Thus, this study investigates age and membership as controllable variables. After examining the arguments, the study presents a theoretical framework, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



Methodology

Measures

The research uses the AL inventory by Neider and Schriesheim (2011), with 16 items measuring employees' perception of AL, focusing on self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalised moral perspective, evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree-5: strongly agree). To measure OJ, 20 items from Colquitt (2001) cover procedural, distributive, relational, and informational justice, also on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree-5: strongly agree), which also demonstrate reliability and validity in previous research (Pimentel, 2018). PO is assessed using Avey et al. (2009) 16-item scale on a 6-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree-6: strongly agree) covering territoriality, self-efficacy, accountability, sense of belongingness, and self-identity. RTC is measured with Oreg (2003) 17-item scale, covering routine-seeking, emotional reaction, short-term focus, and cognitive rigidity, on a 7-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree—7: strongly agree). All these measures demonstrate validity and reliability across various fields, including within the context of family SMEs (Mohammad et al., 2023; Lee and Song, 2023; Lönnqvist et al., 2022; Sieger et al., 2011; Luu, 2023).

Data Collection and Analysis

The study focuses on employees of family SMEs in Vietnam, each with up to 200 employees, owned and managed internally by the second- or third-generation family members. Researchers contacted owner-managers to explain the study's purpose and secure their consent for employee participation. They then selected key subordinates who work closely with the owners to explore managerial leadership and brief them on the research before collecting data.

We first created the questionnaire in English and then translated it into Vietnamese using the back-translation technique. Two bilingual academics ensured consistency (Klotz et al., 2023). We conducted a pilot test with 70 employees from Vietnamese FBs, following Hair et al. (2011) "ten-times rule," which requires a minimum sample size of 10 times the maximum number of inner or outer model links for any latent variable. In this case, RTC had six inner connections. After the pilot study, we removed two indicators with low item loadings (less than 0.6), resulting in 61 retained indicators (Hair et al., 2019).

In the next stage, revised online questionnaires were distributed to 480 employees at 72 family SMEs, yielding 369 valid responses (response rate equals 77%) over 5 months from June 2023 to November 2023. This sample meets presentative criteria with a 95% confidence level and a margin of 5% error for a population of approximately 5 million employees in Vietnamese FBs and was analysed using PLS-SEM (Gill and Johnson, 2010; Chi, 2021). The sample comprises 38.5% non-family members and 61.5% family members, with a gender distribution of 48.0% male and 52.0% female. Age-wise, 34.4% fall below the age of 25, 38.7% belong to the 26-45 age group, and 26.9% are over 45.

Results

Measurement Model

Table 1 shows Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients above 0.7, confirming reliability. Two AL, three OJ, and two PO indicators with factor loadings below 0.6 were removed. Composite reliability (CR) scores range from 0.925 to 0.937, exceeding the 0.7 threshold, indicating high reliability. Average variance extracted (AVE) scores for AL, OJ, PO, and RTC are all above 0.5, demonstrating convergent validity. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) analysis suggests values below 0.85, indicating unique contributions to the SEM (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 1: Reliability test, convergent validity and discriminant validity (HTMT)

	AL	OJ	PO	RT C	OJ x AL	Age	Relation	α	Rho_ A	CR	AVE
AL								0.912	0.913	0.925	0.509
OJ	0.738							0.928	0.928	0.937	0.500
PO	0.762	0.736						0.916	0.917	0.929	0.522
RTC	0.702	0.669	0.701					0.920	0.920	0.931	0.510
OJ x AL	0.106	0.114	0.087	0.155							
Age	0.323	0.277	0.273	0.393	0.104						
Relation	0.670	0.651	0.667	0.747	0.114	0.139					

The finding also presents a good model fit, with a Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) of 0.041 (below 0.085) and a Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.83 (above the 0.8 threshold). Additionally, the statistically non-significant values of d_ULS (squared Euclidean distance) at 2.471 and d_G (geodesic distance) at 0.995 further support the well-fitting model (Dash and Paul, 2021; Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996).

Common Method Biases

The study addresses common method bias in self-reported data using various data sources, clear instructions, respondent anonymity, and diverse scale formats. Exploratory factor analysis shows the first factor explains 14.482% of the variance, passing Harman's single-factor test, confirming the absence of common method bias, and enhancing the research's integrity (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Structural Model

All the items exhibit a variance inflation factor (VIF) below 5, signifying the absence of multicollinearity within the model. The explained variance (R^2) of 66.6% of the variance in RTC is explained by the combined influence of AL, OJ, and PO, suggesting a strong explanatory power for the endogenous variables. In addition, Stone-Geisser's

statistic (Q^2) for RTC is 0.266, indicating that AL, OJ, and PO provide moderate predictive accuracy for RTC, which means the model has practical value in predicting future RTC based on current predictors (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2 affirms pathways in the research model. AL significantly enhances PO ($\beta = 0.7$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. Perceived AL establishes a positive relationship with OJ ($\beta = 0.681$, $p < 0.01$), confirming H2. Additionally, H3 is validated ($\beta = -0.140$, $p < 0.01$), illustrating the role of perceived AL in mitigating RTC. H4 is validated ($\beta = -0.121$, $p < 0.05$), confirming the inverse relationship between OJ and RTC. Lastly, H5 holds significance, confirming the negative relationship between PO and RTC ($\beta = -0.167$, $p < 0.01$). Path coefficients for direct effects indicate that AL, PO, and OJ contribute 32.7%, 39.0%, and 28.3%, respectively, to reducing RTC.

Regarding the mediating effect, perceived AL negatively impacts RTC through the partial mediators of OJ and PO (OJ: $\beta = -0.083$, $p < 0.05$; PO: $\beta = -0.117$, $p < 0.01$), confirming H6 and H7. Consequently, path coefficients for indirect effects reveal that OJ mediates 41.2% of the RTC reduction, while PO accounts for the remaining 58.8%. Regarding the moderating effect, when high perceived OJ is present, the perceived AL has a more pronounced effect on reducing RTC than situations with low perceived OJ, confirming H8 ($\beta = -0.166$, $p < 0.01$). Control variables reveal that both age ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.01$) and membership ($\beta = 0.817$, $p < 0.01$) positively affect RTC, demonstrating that senior employees and non-family members are more resistant than their counterparts.

Table 2. Path coefficients in the research model

	Path coefficients	T – Statistics	Relationship
Direct effects			
H1: AL → PO	0.700	23.446**	Significant
H2: AL → OJ	0.681	21.200**	Significant
H3: AL → RTC	-0.140	2.482*	Significant
H4: OJ → RTC	-0.121	2.151*	Significant
H5: PO → RTC	-0.167	3.194**	Significant
Controllable effect			
Age → RTC	0.219	6.083**	Significant
Membership → RTC	0.817	8.164**	Significant
Mediating effects			
H6: AL → OJ → RTC	-0.083	2.770*	Significant
H7: AL → PO → RTC	-0.117	3.186**	Significant
Moderating effects			
H8: AL*OJ → RTC	-0.166	3.615**	Significant

Note: ** p-value < 0.01; * p-value < 0.05

Figure 2: Results from structural equation modelling

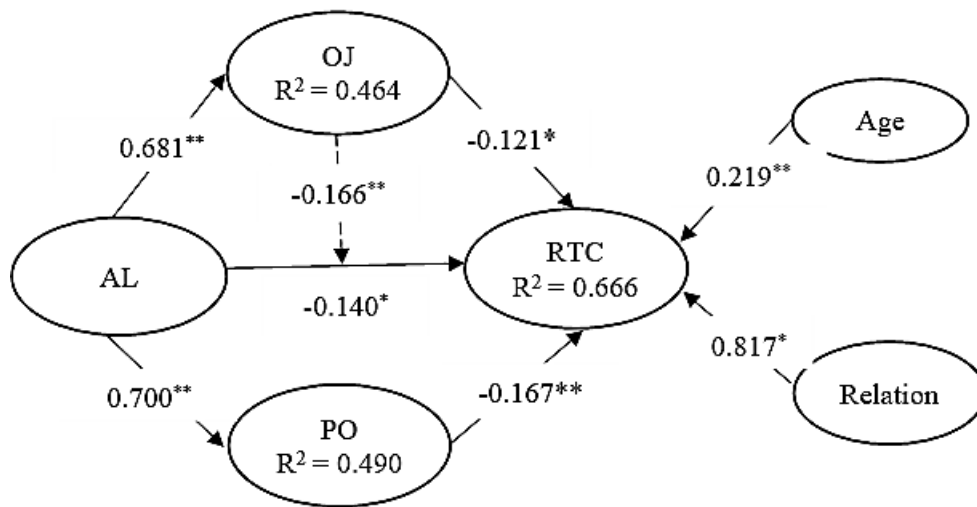
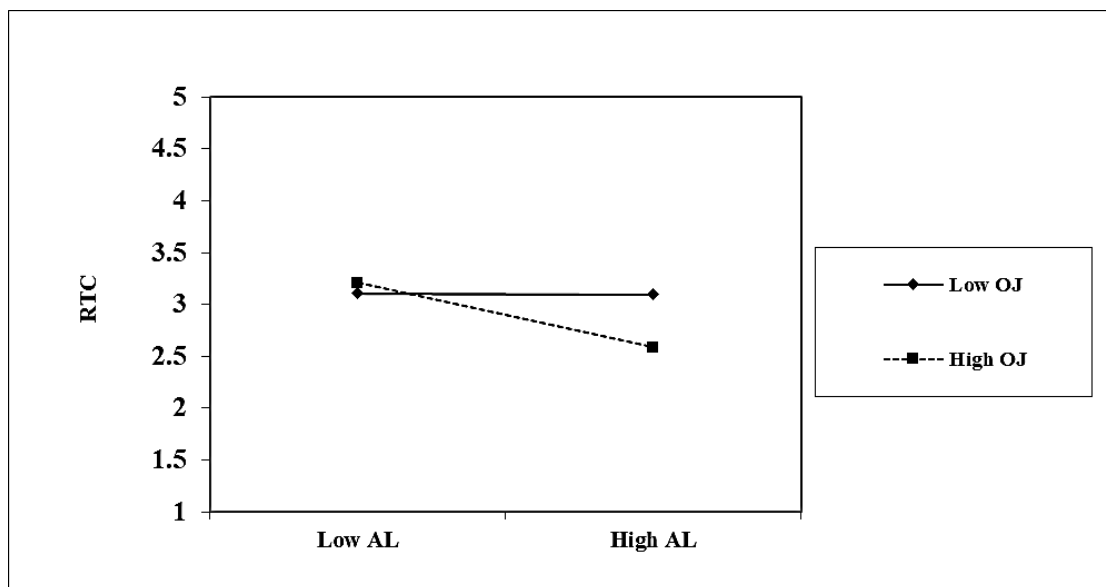


Figure 3. OJ as the moderator in the AL–RTC relationship



In conclusion, RTC during the succession phase in family SMEs can be reduced through (1) the direct effects of AL, OJ, and PO, with PO being the most significant; (2) indirect effects, where PO and OJ serve as mediators, with PO playing the most critical role; and (3) OJ acting as a moderator.

Discussion

This article explores the relationships between the perception of AL, OJ, and PO and followers' RTC in family SMEs during the succession phase.

Initially, our study confirmed negative relationships between AL, OJ, PO, and RTC,

confirming H3, H4, and H5. Consistent with Mousa et al. (2020) and Ge and Campopiano (2022), our findings affirm that perceived AL can directly reduce RTC by encouraging organisational learning through training and learning opportunities, which promote continuous improvement in staff practices. Additionally, the negative OJ-RTC aligns with Arici et al. (2021), demonstrating that perceptions of justice mitigate RTC by fostering a sense of inclusion among employees and eliminating perceptions of second-class treatment among non-family staff. Moreover, echoing Hao et al. (2024), our study supports the idea that PO will encourage pro-organisational behaviours and a mindset that prioritises the organisation's long-term welfare, thereby improving agility and readiness for change. However, unlike previous studies that have examined these relationships in isolation, our research takes an integrative approach by situating them within the unique setting of FBs, where leadership, family dynamics, and emotional attachment are deeply intertwined. This integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of the predictors of RTC, underscores the distinctive interplay of these factors, and offers insights into managing change in FBs.

Secondly, this research expands the literature by examining the psychological process in the AL-RTC relationship with the mediating role of PO and OJ, which have been overlooked in previous research, supporting H1, H2, H6, and H7. The variance in RTC observed among family and non-family members highlights how the perception of transparency in relationships and objectivity in information processing of AL influences the trust and perception of OJ among subordinates, consequently diminishing negative emotions towards change and RTC (Agote et al., 2016). Additionally, PO serves as a mediator in the perceived AL-RTC relationship, mainly when the moral aspect of AL strengthens the bond between employees and the organisation, broadening their sense of ownership from mine to ours and motivating them to embrace change within the organisation (Xu et al., 2023; Chai et al., 2020). This result also clarifies the pro-organisational role of PO, addressing the ambiguities surrounding its influence noted in earlier studies by Preciuk and Wilczyńska (2020), Cocieru et al. (2019) and Chen and Sriphon (2022).

Lastly, the study confirms the moderating role of perceived OJ in the AL-RTC relationship, supporting H8. Prior studies, including those of Zhu et al. (2023) and Gelaidan et al. (2024), have highlighted the significance of integrating environmental and individual factors into the AL-RTC relationship. Despite its critical role in FBs, few studies examine OJ as a moderator, where nepotism and interactions between family and non-family members impact RTC. Moreover, during succession, subordinates frequently encounter challenges despite their sincere efforts. Although these feelings are regular, they can lead to uncertainty and RTC. Subordinates seek OJ and want leaders to consider situational factors, competencies, and efforts during the change initiative rather than focusing solely on the results to establish psychological security. Thus, leaders who demonstrate authentic qualities and empathise with their team's uncertainties can enhance motivation for change (Anderson et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has a limitation that relies solely on employees' perceptions. Although this approach ensures a high response rate and practical implications in FB, it may contain bias due to employees' reluctance to express accurate perceptions of their leaders

(Stantcheva, 2023). Future research could address this limitation by using hierarchical modelling to structure data at two levels, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analyses (Taherdoost, 2022), or a longitudinal survey to provide deeper insights over time (Kuhfeld and Soland, 2022). Lastly, future research could extend this study by exploring how different succession scenarios influence the relationships between AL, PO, OJ, and RTC.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

Since implementing policy reforms and with government support, Vietnam has approximately 500,000 SMEs, contributing 51% of the labour force and serving as a key driver of the country's economic development (Chi, 2021). Among these, FBs are also a critical contributor to Southeast Asia's economy, as 85% of businesses in this region valued at \$1 billion are FBs (Fang et al., 2022). In Vietnam and Southeast Asia, cultural factors such as collectivist values, high power distance, and an underdeveloped legal structure create challenges and opportunities for RTC and leadership in FBs. These traits highlight the region's need for a tailored approach to leadership to ensure the success of later generations of FBs (Bell and Pham, 2021).

Initially, deeply rooted in cultural values such as collectivism and respect for hierarchy, often lead to a strong emphasis on familial connections and generational legacy in decision-making (Fang et al., 2022). These values align well with AL, emphasising transparent communication, ethical decision-making, and role modelling. Hence, authentic leaders can cultivate a community of like-minded individuals who share a collective sense of purpose by leveraging psychological proximity between leaders and followers in this cultural context. This sense encourages employees to prioritise FB's long-term interests over individual benefits and reduce RTC (Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020). However, the region's relationship-orientated values and family governance also highlight an ongoing ethical dilemma associated with these contrasting viewpoints about the roles of family versus non-family members. Thus, leaders' authenticity can navigate this cultural complexity by establishing clear boundaries between business and family while also leveraging "soft power" through close relationships to set a standard of fairness and integrity, mitigate perceptions of favouritism, and build trust among employees (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2017).

Secondly, the high level of government control and ineffective legal systems prevalent in many Southeast Asian countries exacerbate RTC by creating an environment of regulatory uncertainty (Dinh and Calabrò, 2019; Myksvoll et al., 2022). Such institutional weaknesses often lead to unpredictable enforcement of laws and policies, creating challenges for FBs to adapt to evolving market conditions. AL can counter these challenges by fostering an environment that encourages openness to change. AL nurtures a sense of OJ and PO among employees through fairness and responsibility, enabling them to feel personally invested in organisational changes. This heightened sense of justice and ownership helps employees perceive organisational changes as beneficial to the business and their interests, reducing their fear of uncertainty (Zhu et al., 2023). In conclusion, by addressing cultural and institutional challenges, AL emerges as a vital mechanism for guiding FBs through transitions and sustaining their contributions to the region's economy.

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