



Tradition vs. Transformation: How Socioemotional Wealth Drives Individual Responses to Change

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores how socioemotional wealth (SEW) shapes individual responses to organizational change in family firms, using the ADKAR model and the FIRE framework (Focus, Intensity, Resilience). While traditional change models emphasize organizational-level transitions, this research focuses on the emotional and behavioral dynamics at the individual level within family business contexts. Based on in-depth interviews with 30 members of family firms across Central Europe, five key themes emerged: (1) awareness of change is shaped by attachment to family legacy; (2) desire to change is influenced by emotional intensity toward family values; (3) knowledge acquisition depends on trust and open communication; (4) ability to change is supported by emotional resilience and family-based support systems; and (5) reinforcement aligns with the preservation of SEW. The findings reveal SEW's dual role as both a barrier and an enabler of change, offering fresh insights for managing transformation in family firms. This study contributes to change management theory by integrating behavioral and emotional dimensions, and it provides practical guidance for balancing tradition and innovation in family enterprises.

Keywords: Socioemotional Wealth (SEW), Family Firms, Organizational Change, ADKAR Model

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1. Introduction

Family firms represent a significant segment of the global economy, characterized not only by their economic contributions but also by the unique interplay of family dynamics and business objectives (Chrisman, Chua, & Sharma, 2005). Central to understanding decision-making and behavior within family firms is the concept of socioemotional wealth (SEW), which refers to the non-financial aspects of the business that meet the family's affective needs, such as identity, legacy, and emotional attachment (Gómez-Mejía, Haynes, Núñez-Nickel, Jacobson, & Moyano-Fuentes, 2007). SEW has

been widely recognized as a critical driver influencing strategic choices, including responses to organizational change (Berrone, Cruz, & Gómez-Mejía, 2012).

Change management in family firms is particularly complex due to the emotional bonds and long-term orientation embedded in SEW, which can both facilitate and hinder transformation efforts (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006). Traditional organizational change models, such as Lewin's (1947) three-stage model and Kotter's (1996) eight-step process, emphasize structural and leadership-driven aspects of change but often underrepresent the individual psychological and emotional dimensions crucial in family business contexts. To address this gap, individual-focused frameworks like the ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006) have gained prominence. ADKAR outlines five sequential stages—Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement—that individuals navigate during change, highlighting the importance of personal readiness and behavioral adoption.

Complementing ADKAR, the FIRE model (Focus, Intensity, Resilience) offers a nuanced perspective on how emotional and cognitive resources influence individuals' capacity to engage with change (Smith & Lewis, 2020). Focus reflects attention to change stimuli, Intensity captures emotional investment, and Resilience denotes the ability to recover and adapt amid challenges. Integrating these frameworks provides a comprehensive lens to examine how SEW shapes individual responses to change in family firms.

Despite growing interest, empirical research exploring the intersection of SEW, individual change behavior, and these theoretical models remains limited. This study aims to fill this gap by qualitatively investigating how socioemotional wealth influences family firm members' awareness, motivation, knowledge acquisition, ability, and reinforcement of change behaviors, framed within the ADKAR and FIRE models. Understanding these dynamics is vital for practitioners and scholars seeking to balance the preservation of family legacy with the imperative for transformation in an increasingly dynamic business environment.

1. Literature review

1.1 Family firms socio emotional wealth

Socioemotional wealth (SEW) is a foundational concept in family business research that captures the unique, non-financial values family members derive from their firms, such as emotional attachment, family identity, control, and legacy preservation (Salem & Hashem, 2023; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Unlike traditional economic models that prioritize financial returns, SEW emphasizes the affective and relational dimensions that influence decision-making and behavior in family firms. This focus helps explain why family businesses often pursue strategies that prioritize long-term family goals and emotional satisfaction over short-term financial gains (Naldi et al., 2024; Berrone, Cruz, & Gómez-Mejía, 2012).

To operationalize SEW, Berrone et al. (2012) developed the FIBER model, which identifies five key dimensions: Family control and influence, Identification of family members with the firm, Binding social ties, Emotional attachment, and Renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession. Each dimension reflects a distinct facet of SEW that shapes how family members relate to the business and make strategic choices. For example, family control emphasizes the desire to maintain decision-making power within the family, which can lead to behaviors aimed at preserving influence and autonomy. Identification captures the extent to which family members see the firm as an extension of themselves, fostering loyalty and commitment. Binding social ties refer to the interpersonal

relationships that connect family members and employees, creating a social fabric that supports the business. Emotional attachment highlights the deep feelings family members have toward the firm, often manifesting as pride and protectiveness. Finally, renewal through succession underscores the importance of passing the business to future generations, ensuring the continuity of family legacy (Salem & Hashem, 2023; Berrone et al., 2012).

Despite its broad acceptance, the FIBER model has faced challenges in empirical measurement, particularly regarding the binding social ties dimension, which some researchers argue is not unique to family firms (Naldi et al., 2024; Salem & Hashem, 2023). Addressing this, recent research has refined the SEW framework into the FIRE model, which retains Family control (F), Identification (I), Renewal through succession (R), and Emotional attachment (E), while omitting binding social ties to better capture the core emotional wealth specific to family businesses (Naldi et al., 2024; CeFEO, 2024). This refinement enhances the conceptual clarity and measurement precision of SEW, focusing on the cognitive and affective drivers that uniquely influence family firm behavior.

The FIRE model's emphasis on resilience, particularly through renewal and emotional attachment, highlights the dynamic capacity of family members to adapt and sustain their socioemotional bonds amid challenges. This resilience is crucial in understanding how family firms negotiate the tension between preserving tradition and embracing change, as emotional wealth can both motivate commitment and generate resistance to transformation (Naldi et al., 2024; Salem & Hashem, 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that while SEW positively correlates with family control and emotional attachment, it may negatively impact financial performance, indicating that family firms often trade off economic gains to safeguard their socioemotional assets (CeFEO, 2024; Naldi et al., 2024). This trade-off underscores the central role of SEW in shaping strategic decisions and individual behaviors within family firms, where emotional priorities sometimes outweigh financial imperatives.

In conclusion, SEW provides a vital lens for understanding family firm behavior, with the FIBER and FIRE models offering structured, measurable dimensions that capture its complexity. The evolution from FIBER to FIRE reflects ongoing efforts to refine SEW's conceptual and empirical foundations, emphasizing the unique emotional and cognitive factors that drive family business decisions. Recognizing these dimensions is essential for scholars and practitioners aiming to balance the preservation of family legacy with the demands of change and growth in family firms.

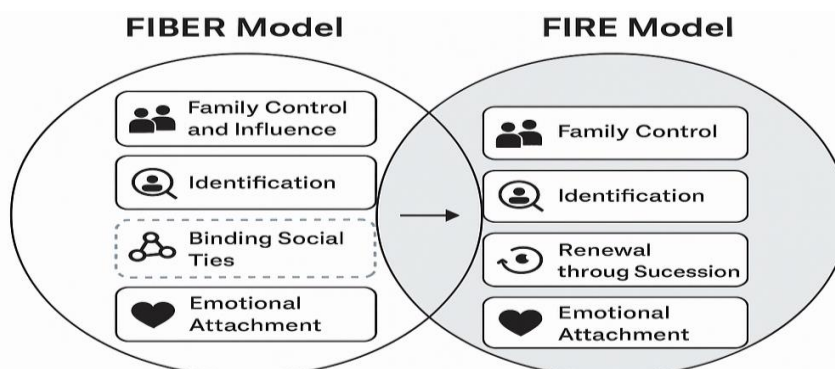


Figure. Comparison Between FIBER and FIRE Models

1.2 Individual Behavior in Change: The ADKAR

The ADKAR model, developed by Jeff Hiatt in the early 2000s, represents a significant advancement in change management theory by focusing explicitly on individual behavior during organizational change (Hiatt, 2006; Prosci, 2025). Unlike earlier models such as Lewin's three-step process or Kotter's eight-step framework, which primarily address change at the organizational or group level, ADKAR centers on the psychological and behavioral transitions individuals must undergo for change to be successful. This shift reflects a growing recognition in academic literature that organizational transformation ultimately depends on individual adoption and adaptation (Hiatt, 2006; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011).

The model's acronym stands for Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement, representing five sequential stages that individuals progress through when confronted with change. Awareness involves understanding the need for change and its driving factors, which is critical to overcoming initial resistance (Hiatt, 2006). Desire reflects the motivational component, where individuals develop a personal willingness to support and participate in the change process. Knowledge pertains to acquiring the information and skills necessary to implement change, while Ability focuses on translating that knowledge into effective action. Finally, Reinforcement ensures that new behaviors are sustained over time, preventing regression to old habits (Hiatt, 2006; Prosci, 2025).

The ADKAR model's development was grounded in extensive empirical research, including a 14-year study involving 900 organizations across 59 countries, which provided robust evidence of its applicability and effectiveness across diverse sectors and cultures (Prosci, 2025; Soni, 2023). This empirical foundation distinguishes ADKAR from more prescriptive or theoretical models, offering a practical, measurable framework that organizations can use to diagnose where individuals may struggle in the change process and tailor interventions accordingly (Hiatt, 2006; Soni, 2023).

Academically, the ADKAR model has been praised for addressing a critical gap in change management literature by explicitly linking individual psychological readiness to organizational outcomes (Oreg et al., 2011). It integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, recognizing that awareness alone does not guarantee desire, nor does knowledge automatically translate into ability. This nuanced understanding aligns with psychological theories of behavior change, such as the Transtheoretical Model and Theory of Planned Behavior, which emphasize stages and determinants of individual readiness and action (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Ajzen, 1991).

Moreover, ADKAR's focus on reinforcement as a distinct stage highlights the importance of sustaining change beyond initial adoption, a dimension often underemphasized in earlier models. Reinforcement mechanisms—such as feedback, rewards, and cultural embedding—are essential to prevent relapse into old behaviors, ensuring that change becomes institutionalized (Hiatt, 2006; Prosci, 2025).

Recent academic studies have applied the ADKAR model in various contexts, including healthcare, technology implementation, and education, demonstrating its versatility and effectiveness in managing resistance and facilitating successful change (Soni, 2023; Nyoni & Dube, 2020). For instance, in healthcare settings, ADKAR has been used to guide staff through complex technological upgrades, ensuring that awareness and desire are cultivated before technical training begins, thereby improving adoption rates (Soni, 2023).

Critically, the model also acknowledges that change is not always linear; individuals may regress or experience difficulty at different stages, necessitating ongoing assessment and support. This dynamic perspective contrasts with earlier linear models and aligns with contemporary views of change as a complex, iterative process (Hiatt, 2006; Oreg et al., 2011).

Building on this understanding, the ADKAR model delineates five critical stages—Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement—that individuals must navigate to successfully adopt change. Awareness involves recognizing why change is necessary, setting the foundation for readiness. Desire reflects the personal motivation to engage with and support the change, addressing emotional and psychological factors. Knowledge equips individuals with the information and skills needed to implement new behaviors, while Ability focuses on translating that knowledge into effective action. Finally, Reinforcement ensures that new behaviors are sustained over time through feedback, rewards, and ongoing support mechanisms. This stage-based approach allows organizations to diagnose where individuals may struggle and tailor interventions accordingly, acknowledging that progression through these stages is not always linear. By integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, the ADKAR model offers a comprehensive framework that aligns with contemporary views of change as a complex, iterative, and deeply personal process.



Figure 2. The ADKAR Pocess to change.

1.3 The Impact of Socioemotional Wealth on Individual Behavior

Socioemotional wealth (SEW) has become a pivotal concept in family business research, offering a lens through which to understand how the unique emotional and relational values embedded in family firms influence individual behavior. SEW encompasses the non-financial aspects that family members derive from their involvement in the business, such as identity, legacy, emotional attachment, and the desire to maintain family control (Gómez-Mejía, Haynes, Núñez-Nickel, Jacobson, & Moyano-Fuentes, 2007). These affective dimensions distinguish family firms from non-family businesses and shape how individuals within the family respond to strategic decisions and organizational dynamics.

The emotional bonds and identification with the family firm foster a strong sense of belonging and commitment, which can significantly influence individual attitudes and behaviors. Family members often view the firm as an extension of themselves, intertwining personal identity with organizational outcomes (Berrone, Cruz, & Gómez-Mejía, 2012). This deep identification can motivate individuals to act in ways that preserve the family's legacy and socioemotional wealth, sometimes prioritizing these goals over purely economic considerations. Consequently, socioemotional wealth acts as a powerful driver of behavior, shaping how individuals perceive risks, opportunities, and the need for change.

Several conceptual models have been developed to capture the multifaceted nature of SEW and its behavioral implications. The FIBER model, introduced by Berrone et al. (2012), identifies five dimensions of SEW: Family control and influence, Identification of family members with the firm,

Binding social ties, Emotional attachment, and Renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession. Each dimension reflects a different facet of the emotional wealth that family members seek to protect. For example, family control emphasizes maintaining decision-making power, while emotional attachment highlights the affective ties that bind members to the firm. These dimensions collectively influence individual behavior by shaping motivations, perceptions, and responses to organizational events.

Despite its broad acceptance, the FIBER model has faced critique regarding the distinctiveness of some dimensions, particularly Binding social ties, which may not be unique to family firms (Naldi et al., 2024). To address these concerns, the FIRE model was proposed as a refinement, focusing on four core dimensions: Family control, Identification, Renewal through succession, and Emotional attachment (Naldi et al., 2024). This streamlined model emphasizes the emotional and cognitive elements most central to family firms' socioemotional wealth, offering a more precise framework for understanding how SEW influences individual behavior.

The emotional intensity embedded in SEW can have complex effects on individual responses, especially in contexts involving change. While strong socioemotional ties can foster resilience, loyalty, and long-term commitment, they can also generate resistance to change when individuals perceive that transformations threaten family values or legacy (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006). This dual role highlights the intricate interplay between affective motivations and behavioral outcomes, where socioemotional wealth simultaneously acts as a source of strength and a potential barrier.

Furthermore, individual behavior in family firms is shaped by the alignment of personal and collective family values, which mediate how socioemotional wealth is prioritized and enacted (Ruf, Moog, & Belausteguigoitia Rius, 2020). Values evolve over time and influence how family members interpret their roles, responsibilities, and the meaning of the family business, thereby affecting their willingness to support or resist strategic initiatives.

In sum, the literature underscores that socioemotional wealth profoundly impacts individual behavior in family firms by embedding emotional, identity, and legacy considerations into decision-making processes. Conceptual models like FIBER and FIRE provide structured ways to understand these influences, highlighting the emotional and cognitive dimensions that drive family members' actions. Recognizing the role of SEW is essential for comprehending how individuals navigate the tensions between tradition and transformation within family businesses.

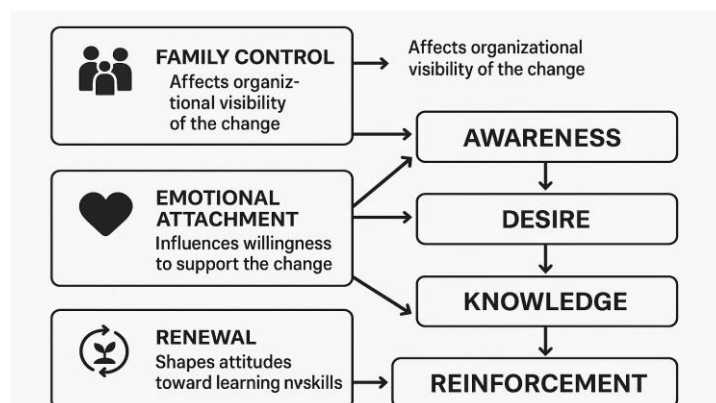


Figure 3. SEW impact on Individual behavior

3. Methodolgy

This qualitative study explores how socioemotional wealth (SEW) shapes individual responses to organizational change in family firms, using the ADKAR model and the FIRE framework (Focus, Intensity, Resilience) as theoretical guides. The interpretive qualitative approach was selected to capture the complex emotional and behavioral dynamics inherent in family business contexts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and meanings (Nordqvist, Melin, & Sharma, 2014; Micelotta, Glaser, & Dorian, 2020).

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 30 members of family firms across Central Europe. The purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity in generational representation and organizational roles, which enriched the data with a broad range of perspectives on how SEW influences individual behavior during change. The sample size of 30 participants was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation, where no new themes emerged, consistent with qualitative research standards (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The interview guide was designed to explore participants' experiences related to each stage of the ADKAR model—awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement—while probing the emotional dimensions of focus, intensity, and resilience as conceptualized in the FIRE framework. Narrative techniques encouraged participants to share detailed stories about their engagement with change, emphasizing family legacy, emotional attachment, and trust.

Thematic analysis, following the rigorous and widely accepted approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the data. This method involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually, allowing for close engagement with the data and reflexive interpretation. The iterative process facilitated the identification of five key themes aligned with the ADKAR stages and informed by the FIRE dimensions: awareness shaped by family legacy attachment; desire influenced by emotional intensity toward family values; knowledge acquisition dependent on trust and open communication; ability supported by emotional resilience and family support; and reinforcement aligned with the preservation of socioemotional wealth.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, the study incorporated several strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Triangulation was achieved by including participants from various generations and organizational roles. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to validate interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained through researcher journaling to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases throughout data collection and analysis. Detailed contextual descriptions were provided to enhance the transferability of findings to similar family business contexts.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and ethical approval was obtained from [Institution Name], ensuring compliance with research ethics standards regarding confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection.

This methodological approach was deliberately chosen to answer the research questions focused on understanding how SEW influences individual behavioral responses to change within family firms. By integrating the ADKAR and FIRE frameworks within a qualitative design, the study offers rich

theoretical insights and practical implications for managing change in emotionally complex family business environments.

Table 1. Overview of the Qualitative Methodology Process.

Methodology Process	Description	Example from Study
Research Design	Interpretive qualitative approach focusing on subjective experiences and meanings related to SEW and change.	Exploring emotional and behavioral dynamics of family firm members using ADKAR and FIRE frameworks.
Sampling Strategy	Purposive sampling to select participants with diverse generational and role perspectives.	30 family firm members from Central Europe, including senior management and governance roles.
Data Collection Method	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews encouraging narrative storytelling about change experiences.	Interviews lasting 60–120 minutes focusing on ADKAR stages and FIRE emotional dimensions.
Data Preparation	Transcription and organization of interview data for systematic analysis.	Verbatim transcripts prepared and organized for manual coding.
Data Analysis Technique	Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization, coding, theme development.	Manual coding to identify themes related to awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement stages.
Coding Process	Iterative, manual coding with open and axial coding phases to refine categories and themes.	Developing five key themes aligned with ADKAR and FIRE dimensions.
Trustworthiness Measures	Triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and thick description to ensure rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).	Sharing findings with participants for feedback; researcher journaling to reflect on biases.
Ethical Considerations	Obtaining informed consent and ethical approval from relevant institutional board.	Participants signed consent forms; study approved by [Institution Name] ethics committee.
Link to Research Questions	Methodology designed to answer how SEW influences individual change behavior within family firms.	Interview questions and analysis focused on emotional and behavioral responses at each ADKAR stage.

4. Results

This study aimed to explore how socioemotional wealth (SEW) informs and shapes individual-level responses to organizational change within family firms, utilizing the ADKAR model and the FIRE framework as interpretive lenses. The analysis of in-depth interviews with members of family-owned businesses across Central Europe illuminated a rich tapestry of emotional, cognitive, and relational processes that underpin how change is perceived, internalized, and enacted within these unique organizational contexts.

The first major theme centers on the **awareness** stage. Rather than being a straightforward cognitive acknowledgment of the need for change, awareness among participants was deeply infused with emotional meaning, grounded in a strong identification with the family business's heritage. This stage revealed that change is not recognized in isolation but evaluated through the lens of family continuity and legacy preservation. The emotional salience of the family's historical narrative and its symbolic value often heightened individuals' sensitivity to external threats or internal shifts, framing change not merely as an organizational imperative but as a deeply personal and familial concern.

In the **desire** stage, the emotional **intensity** associated with core family values and traditions played a decisive role in shaping participants' motivational orientation toward change. Rather than uniformly supporting or resisting transformation, individuals expressed a spectrum of responses, influenced by how proposed changes aligned—or conflicted—with the deeply held beliefs and emotional investments associated with the family identity. Some perceived change as essential for long-term viability, interpreting it as a form of stewardship, while others feared it could erode the very socioemotional foundations that gave the firm its unique character and legitimacy.

The **knowledge** dimension was framed by the extent to which interpersonal **trust** and communicative openness were present within the family and the organizational structure. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of transparent, respectful dialogue as a mechanism for demystifying change, reducing uncertainty, and building collective competence. This climate of openness facilitated not only the dissemination of technical knowledge but also the transmission of shared meaning, helping individuals integrate new understandings into the existing socioemotional fabric of the firm.

At the stage of **ability**, participants' capacity to translate intention into action was significantly supported by **emotional resilience** and the availability of familial support systems. The presence of emotionally attuned family relationships and informal mentoring structures contributed to a sense of psychological safety and self-efficacy. The ability to adapt was thus not simply a matter of individual skill but emerged from a broader relational ecosystem in which encouragement, reassurance, and shared struggle functioned as critical resources for navigating uncertainty.

Finally, the **reinforcement** stage was closely tied to the preservation and transmission of socioemotional wealth over time. Participants described a variety of symbolic and relational mechanisms—such as storytelling, shared rituals, and inclusive governance practices—that reinforced behavioral change while honoring the values embedded in the family's legacy. These practices served not only to institutionalize new routines but also to reaffirm collective identity, ensuring that change was not perceived as a rupture but rather as an evolution consistent with the firm's enduring ethos.

Taken together, these themes reveal that SEW operates as both a stabilizing force and a potential source of inertia, mediating how individuals interpret and engage with organizational change. The findings underscore the inherently affective and relational nature of change processes in family firms, where behavioral adaptation is deeply entangled with emotional attachments, value commitments, and intergenerational dynamics. This dual role of SEW—simultaneously enabling and constraining—highlights the complexity of fostering change in environments where personal and professional domains are inextricably linked.

Table 2. Summary of Key Themes Linking Socioemotional Wealth (FIRE) and Individual Change (ADKAR)

ADKAR Stage	Corresponding FIRE Dimension(s)	Description of Key Theme
Awareness	Family Legacy Attachment (Focus)	Awareness of change is deeply influenced by emotional attachment to the family legacy, making recognition of change a personal and affective process.
Desire	Emotional Intensity toward Family Values	The motivation to support change is shaped by the strength of emotional bonds to family values, creating tension between innovation and preservation.
Knowledge	Trust and Open Communication (Intensity)	Acquisition of knowledge depends on transparent communication and trust within the family and organization, enabling effective learning.
Ability	Emotional Resilience and Family Support	The ability to implement change is supported by emotional resilience fostered through family-based support systems that help overcome challenges.
Reinforcement	Preservation of Socioemotional Wealth (Resilience)	Sustaining change aligns with reinforcing family values and socioemotional wealth through recognition, shared narratives, and ongoing involvement.

6. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study offer deep and multifaceted insights into the complex interplay between socioemotional wealth (SEW) and individual responses to organizational change within family firms. In doing so, the study meaningfully extends and enriches scholarly conversations at the intersection of family business research and change management. By employing the ADKAR model as a processual framework and integrating it with the FIRE model's focus on emotional dimensions—focus, intensity, and resilience—this research offers a novel interpretive lens through which to examine the ways in which deeply embedded, non-financial family firm characteristics shape the trajectory of change at the individual level.

At the core of this study is the observation that family firms do not experience change as a purely technical or procedural process, but rather as a profoundly affective and identity-driven journey, one that is conditioned by long-standing emotional investments, shared family histories, and collective aspirations. Each stage of the ADKAR model—awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement—is not merely operationalized as a behavior or a mindset to be adopted; instead, these stages are infused with emotional meaning, driven by the logic of socioemotional preservation and the maintenance of family-based identity capital.

The theme of awareness emerged as especially salient in reframing traditional change management assumptions. While conventional models suggest that awareness of the need for change is primarily a rational process grounded in strategic assessments, environmental scanning, or performance feedback,

this study's findings challenge that premise within the context of family businesses. Here, awareness is shown to be an emotional awakening, filtered through the lens of family legacy, historical continuity, and intergenerational commitment. Participants often spoke of "feeling" the need for change rather than simply understanding it, with awareness arising from a perceived threat not only to the business model but to the symbolic integrity of the family itself. This supports and expands upon SEW theory, particularly the idea that family firms are highly loss-averse when it comes to socioemotional endowments (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Thus, awareness in family firms is not only about recognizing risk—it is about perceiving risk to identity, lineage, and belonging.

In the desire stage, the emotional intensity with which family members relate to the firm's values, traditions, and purpose was found to be a critical determinant of motivation. In contrast to non-family organizations, where desire for change may stem from individual incentives or the appeal of reduced workload or advancement, family firm members weigh the emotional cost of change against their commitment to family values. The findings point to a dialectical tension: on one hand, SEW can act as a compelling motivator when the change is perceived to reinforce the family's purpose and values—what might be termed a "legacy-affirming change." On the other hand, when change appears misaligned with tradition or implies a departure from inherited practices, it can provoke resistance, not because of laziness or inertia, but due to a protective stance toward emotional investments. This dual nature of SEW—both generative and inhibiting—offers a valuable refinement to change management theory by highlighting that desire cannot be assumed to follow awareness linearly in family contexts. It must be negotiated through emotional validation.

The knowledge phase brought forward the indispensable role of trust and communication, particularly within family-based relational systems. Learning and knowledge transfer in change processes are often treated as training problems, focused on the availability of technical information or access to resources. However, within family firms, this study found that the willingness to acquire and integrate new knowledge is deeply affected by the quality of interpersonal relationships. Open, transparent, and respectful communication—especially among generations—was essential not just for transmitting knowledge but for making knowledge emotionally acceptable. The findings align with and extend organizational learning literature by underscoring that in family firms, knowledge is rarely neutral—it is judged in relation to emotional trustworthiness, the intentions of those communicating it, and its perceived alignment with the family's socioemotional goals.

Similarly, in the ability stage, the findings underscored the importance of emotional resilience and social support systems anchored in the family. While classical interpretations of ability focus on competencies, skills, and structural enablers, participants in this study described their ability to change as deeply reliant on affective resources—empathy, encouragement, and the psychological safety to make mistakes. These sources of emotional resilience were often facilitated by interpersonal bonds with family mentors, shared understandings of struggle, and the presence of non-judgmental support, which collectively formed a scaffold for adaptation. Such dynamics move beyond individualistic interpretations of ability and suggest that relational capacity—the ability to draw strength from others—is an underexplored yet critical factor in enabling change in family firms.

The final stage of reinforcement presented one of the clearest examples of how SEW operates as a guiding principle in sustaining change. In typical change models, reinforcement is driven by performance monitoring, metrics, or individual rewards. In contrast, this study found that in family firms, reinforcement mechanisms are often narrative-based, symbolic, and collective. Participants

emphasized the importance of rituals, recognition of family history, the re-telling of legacy stories, and shared celebrations as essential means to embed change within the emotional DNA of the firm. In this sense, reinforcement is not about compliance—it is about continuity through transformation, ensuring that new behaviors feel like an authentic extension of the family's ongoing journey. These findings expand reinforcement theory by illustrating that symbolic reinforcement—such as invoking the family's legacy or aligning change with a founder's vision—can be as influential as any structural reward system.

Taken together, the findings of this study significantly contribute to the theoretical evolution of both change management and family business literature. First, they demonstrate that socioemotional wealth is not merely a background condition or an outcome of family ownership; it is an active, dynamic force that shapes each individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral orientation throughout the change process. Second, the use of the ADKAR model, traditionally deployed in managerial or organizational development settings, is innovatively reinterpreted through the SEW and FIRE lenses, allowing a more emotionally intelligent reading of change dynamics in family firms. Third, the study provides empirical grounding to the call for integrating micro-level psychological mechanisms into the study of SEW, bridging the macro focus of strategic family firm literature with the lived experience of individuals navigating change.

From a practical standpoint, the study emphasizes that change management in family firms cannot rely solely on formal processes or generic change models. Effective interventions must take into account the emotional architecture of the firm, designing strategies that recognize, respect, and engage with the firm's socioemotional wealth. For change to be sustainable, it must be communicated in ways that resonate with the family's identity, enacted in environments of trust and support, and reinforced through mechanisms that affirm continuity rather than rupture.

In sum, this study offers a rich and grounded account of how socioemotional wealth serves as both a lens and a lever in shaping individual responses to organizational change in family firms. It provides a compelling case for the continued integration of emotional and relational dynamics into change theory and offers a foundation for future research seeking to develop context-sensitive models that reflect the complex realities of family-based enterprises.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of how socioemotional wealth (SEW) influences individual behavior during organizational change in family firms, using the ADKAR model as a behavioral framework and the FIRE dimensions to capture the emotional and relational nuances unique to family businesses. The findings demonstrate that SEW is not merely a peripheral consideration but a central force shaping each stage of individual change—awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. This integration offers a novel perspective that bridges the gap between family business scholarship and change management theory by emphasizing the emotional and identity-based drivers of behavior alongside cognitive and skill-based factors.

At the awareness stage, the deep attachment to family legacy transforms the recognition of change from a rational assessment into an emotionally charged process. This highlights that in family firms, change is perceived through the lens of preserving identity and continuity, which can either heighten vigilance toward necessary transformations or provoke resistance due to fear of loss. The desire to change is similarly shaped by the intensity of emotional bonds to family values, illustrating how

motivation in these contexts is complex and often ambivalent. While some family members embrace change as a means to safeguard the firm's future, others may resist to protect socioemotional wealth, underscoring the dual role SEW plays as both an enabler and a barrier.

Knowledge acquisition and ability development are deeply embedded in trust, open communication, and family-based support systems. These relational factors create a unique learning environment that differs from non-family organizations, where social capital and emotional resilience are critical for overcoming challenges and effectively implementing new behaviors. The study reveals that emotional resilience, nurtured by family support, is essential for individuals to develop the capacity to change, highlighting the importance of considering affective resources in change management strategies.

Reinforcement mechanisms in family firms also diverge from traditional models by focusing on the preservation and celebration of socioemotional wealth. Sustaining change is not only about maintaining new behaviors but also about reinforcing shared narratives, family values, and legacy. This collective reinforcement fosters long-term commitment and embeds change within the family's ongoing story, ensuring that transformation aligns with the broader socioemotional goals of the enterprise.

Overall, this research enriches existing literature by providing empirical evidence that socioemotional wealth is a foundational element influencing individual change processes in family firms. It challenges conventional change management approaches that often overlook the emotional and identity-related dimensions critical in these contexts. By doing so, it offers a more holistic framework that integrates behavioral, cognitive, and emotional factors, contributing to both theory and practice.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that successful change initiatives in family firms require a delicate balance between honoring tradition and embracing innovation. Change leaders must engage with the emotional realities of family members, fostering trust and open dialogue, and leveraging family support networks to build resilience. Reinforcement strategies should emphasize the continuity of family legacy alongside new ways of working, ensuring that change is perceived as a collective journey rather than an imposed disruption.

Future research could extend these insights by examining how socioemotional wealth and individual change behaviors evolve across different cultural settings and stages of family firm development. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to understand how the interplay between SEW and change readiness shifts over time, particularly during succession or crisis periods. Such investigations would further deepen the understanding of how family firms can navigate the tension between preserving socioemotional wealth and adapting to an ever-changing business environment.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical importance of integrating socioemotional wealth considerations into change management frameworks within family firms. By acknowledging the emotional and relational underpinnings of individual behavior, it provides a pathway for more effective and sustainable organizational transformation that respects the unique nature of family enterprises.

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