

Leader Self-Sacrifice and the Architecture of Legacy: A Multi-Case Study on Family Firm Longevity

Abstract

Legacy in family firms connects past, present, and future through narratives and practices that transcend economics. This study adopts a mechanism-first view, positioning leader self-sacrifice (LSS)—the voluntary acceptance of personal costs for collective benefit—as the antecedent that activates legacy dynamics. Using an inductive multi-case design across continents, we show how LSS triggers three facets of legacy: unintentional building, shared intentional transmission, and intentional preservation and reframing. Through narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual channels, these facets convert sacrifice into sustainability and predict business longevity. We clarify boundary conditions distinguishing sacrifice from suffering, highlight governance choices such as professionalization, and examine reciprocity in predecessor–successor relationships. The Leadership Legacy Sustainability Roadmap formalizes the causal chain of LSS, legacy facets, sustainability and longevity. This work advances socioemotional-wealth theorizing, specifies sequencing, and offers practical guidance for succession and strategy beyond crisis-specific contexts.

Keywords: leader self-sacrifice; leadership legacy; family firms; narrative capital; spiritual capital; longevity

Introduction

Leadership legacy (LL) represents the enduring imprint that leaders leave on individuals, organizations, and communities through values enacted in everyday decisions and strategic choices (Brooks, Stark, & Caverhill, 2004; Galford & Maruca, 2006). Far from being a symbolic artifact, LL operates as a dynamic construct that shapes organizational identity and guides behavior across temporal horizons. In family firms—entities governed and/or managed by a dominant family coalition—legacy assumes heightened salience because these organizations pursue dual objectives: financial performance and socioemotional continuity (Berrone, Cruz, & Gomez-Mejia, 2012). Legacy functions simultaneously as memory, preserving the ethos of prior generations, and as mandate, orienting future action toward stewardship and continuity (Sharma et al., 2020; Chrisman et al., 2003). This duality renders LL both a strategic resource and a socioemotional anchor, differentiating family firms from their non-family counterparts.

Existing scholarship has illuminated multiple dimensions of LL, emphasizing resilience, prosocial motives, ethical purpose, and the narrative transmission of shared struggles as foundational elements (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Toor & Ofori, 2011; Kammerlander et al., 2015; Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2014). These attributes sustain identity and influence succession effectiveness, innovation, and transgenerational entrepreneurship. However, a critical research gap persists: the causal sequencing between leader behaviors and legacy outcomes remains under-theorized. Specifically, prior studies have not clarified how leaders' discretionary actions—particularly those involving personal cost—activate and sustain legacy dynamics across generations. Without understanding this mechanism, theory risks portraying legacy as an emergent phenomenon rather than a process initiated by deliberate leadership choices.

To address this gap, we position leader self-sacrifice (LSS) as a generative antecedent of LL. Defined as the volitional acceptance of tangible or intangible costs for the benefit of others or the collective (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998; De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004), LSS transcends transactional leadership by signaling authentic commitment to shared values and long-term goals. Sacrificial acts—such as foregoing personal rewards, assuming disproportionate burdens, or relinquishing power—are not episodic anomalies; they are catalytic mechanisms that embed moral codes and relational norms into the organizational fabric, creating narratives that successors appropriate and reinterpret. This leads us to ask: How does leader self-sacrifice function as a

generative antecedent of leadership legacy in family firms, and through which mechanisms and boundary conditions does it contribute to long-term survival and business longevity?

Our findings show that LSS acts as a catalyst for LL through three sequential facets—unintentional building, shared intentional transmission, and intentional preservation and reframing—where sacrificial acts embed values that are later articulated and adapted by successors to ensure continuity and relevance. Boundary conditions distinguishing sacrifice from suffering, reciprocity in predecessor–successor relationships, and narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual channels collectively amplify legacy durability, converting values into sustainable outcomes that predict business longevity. By answering this question, our study re-sequences legacy theory by positioning LSS as a causal origin, operationalizes socioemotional wealth through mechanism bundles and governance choices, and introduces ethical and relational boundaries that safeguard legacy transmission.

Theoretical Background

Leadership legacy (LL) in family firms is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that simultaneously operates as a strategic resource and socioemotional anchor, shaping organizational identity and continuity across generations. Family firms are uniquely exposed to the interdependence between economic outcomes and noneconomic goals, notably identity preservation, reputation, family cohesion, and the aspiration to pass the business on to heirs (Berrone, Cruz, & Gomez-Mejia, 2012; Chrisman, Chua, & Litz, 2003). In such settings, legacy works as memory and mandate: it preserves a family’s founding ethos while orienting conduct toward stewardship and transgenerational entrepreneurship through stories, rituals, and artifacts that encode “how we do things here” (Kammerlander et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2020). Yet, despite agreement that legacy matters for succession and longevity, prior research often treats the antecedents of legacy as diffuse—an emergent by-product of time, success, or charismatic founders—rather than specifying leadership mechanisms that initiate and sequence legacy formation. We argue that this under-specification obscures the causal architecture of legacy and limits prescriptive guidance for practice.

We position leader self-sacrifice (LSS)—the volitional acceptance of personal, tangible or intangible costs for the collective good—as a generative antecedent of LL (Choi & Mai-Dalton,

1998; De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004). LSS differs from positive leader traits (e.g., humility, integrity) insofar as it is costly, observable, and purposive, and therefore functions as a credible signal of commitment to shared values and long-term horizons (Spence, 1973; Osterloh & Frey, 2000). When leaders forego private benefits, absorb disproportionate burdens, or relinquish power to enable continuity, they enact a costly signal that reduces information asymmetries about intentions, thereby legitimating claims to stewardship and binding followers to a prosocial, future-oriented identity (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011; Suchman, 1995). The credibility of this signal rests on the irreversibility or salience of the cost and on follower attributions regarding volition and justice; perceived coercion or performative sacrifice undermines the mechanism.

Locating LSS within the family-firm context clarifies why its legacy effects are amplified. First, family firms are characterized by familiness—idiosyncratic, relationship-based resources that emerge from family involvement in ownership and management (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Pearson, Carr, & Shaw, 2008). Familiness intensifies sensemaking around sacrificial acts: kinship ties enlarge the audience for sacrifice, deepen emotional encoding of events, and accelerate diffusion of norms through overlapping family–business networks. Second, family firms pursue socioemotional wealth (SEW), prioritizing identity and continuity over short-term financial maximization when the two conflict (Berrone et al., 2012; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). Because LSS affirms stewardship motives under uncertainty, it reduces internal contestation regarding strategic choices with delayed payoffs (e.g., investments in reputation, community, or human capital). Third, family firms frequently operate at the intersection of institutional logics—market, community, religion, and family—so sacrificial acts are interpreted against moral as well as economic yardsticks, increasing their symbolic potency and durability (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012).

We theorize that LSS converts into legacy through bundled conversion mechanisms—narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual capital—that translate costly acts into enduring resources. Narrative capital codifies sacrifice into identity scripts and founding stories that become teachable moments, stored in archives and rituals, and reused to legitimate subsequent decisions (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009). Socioemotional capital increases as followers reciprocate credible commitment with loyalty, trust, and discretionary effort, strengthening the relational glue necessary for succession and difficult transitions (Pearson et al., 2008; Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Spiritual capital—a sense

of purpose beyond profit—provides an interpretive frame that links sacrifice to vocation and service, thereby sustaining resolve during adversity and legitimizing non-market choices (Roosevelt Malloch, 2010). These forms of capital interact: narrative codification stabilizes socioemotional bonds; spiritual frames intensify narrative resonance; and socioemotional bonds make spiritual narratives actionable in governance and strategy.

Importantly, LSS does not act on a blank slate: it imprints organizations by anchoring early routines and norms that persist and guide later behavior (Stinchcombe, 1965; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Sacrificial founding episodes—involving, for example, delayed dividends to retain employees or the ceding of authority to professional managers—leave traces in routines, symbols, and selection criteria (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Successors then perform identity work by appropriating and reframing these scripts to solve contemporary challenges, preserving continuity while enabling change (McAdams, 2001; Kammerlander et al., 2015). In this sense, LSS is both anchor and lever: it anchors identity by fixing credible commitments in memory, and it leverages legitimacy to authorize adaptive shifts when contexts change. The paradox of continuity-through-change thus becomes tractable: sacrificial origins legitimize strategic discontinuities that would otherwise threaten identity (Smith & Lewis, 2011; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

We further specify boundary conditions and moderators that shape whether sacrifice remains generative. First, sacrifice must be distinguished from suffering: sacrifice is chosen, proportionate, and bounded; suffering is imposed, chronic, and corrosive of wellbeing and family cohesion (Helin & Lindström, 2003). Without boundaries, sacrifice risks sliding into role overload, burnout, or family strain, undermining the very resources it seeks to protect (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Second, visibility and attribution moderate effects: when costs are visible and perceived as fair and other-regarding, signaling and reciprocity strengthen; when unseen or suspected of impression management, effects attenuate or backfire (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004). Third, governance choices such as professionalization, board independence, and role clarity act as institutional safeguards that keep sacrifice from degenerating into paternalism or entrenchment and help channel prosocial motives into scalable systems (Napolitano, Marino, & Ojala, 2015; Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997). Fourth, resource slack and crisis salience amplify the interpretive weight of sacrifice: costly choices during downturns produce stronger narrative and socioemotional dividends than equivalent costs during booms because they are harder to fake and

more diagnostic of convictions (Suchman, 1995). Fifth, relationship quality and reciprocity norms between predecessor and successor shape transmission: calibrated, mutual sacrifices facilitate handoffs and reduce identity foreclosure, whereas unilateral sacrifice coupled with control crowds out successor agency (Osterloh & Frey, 2000; Hamilton, 2006).

This theorization also clarifies the dark side and alternative pathways. Sacrifice can be misread as a warrant for unethical pro-organizational behavior (e.g., bending rules “for the firm”), or justify over-identification that suppresses dissent and experimentation (Vadera, Pratt, & Mishra, 2013; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). Family control coupled with sacrificial narratives can breed entrenchment, nepotism, or resistance to outside talent, eventually eroding dynamic capabilities (Schulze, Lubatkin, & Dino, 2003; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Our boundary framing therefore centers voluntariness, proportionality, reciprocity, and governability as ethical criteria that preserve the generative core of sacrifice while protecting health and adaptability.

Finally, positioning LSS as a causal origin enriches theory in several adjacent domains. Within SEW, it specifies how non-economic preferences are operationalized through mechanism bundles and governance complements rather than invoked post hoc (Berrone et al., 2012; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011). Within stewardship theory, it portrays stewardship not as a static disposition but as an enacted, cost-bearing practice that builds legitimacy and elicits reciprocal commitment (Davis et al., 1997; Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Within institutional logics, it shows how moral and community logics can be strategically mobilized through sacrificial episodes to recalibrate market-oriented practices without identity loss (Thornton et al., 2012). And within legacy scholarship, it re-sequences causality: rather than an emergent artifact of elapsed time and success, legacy is a process initiated by discretionary, costly leader behavior that is subsequently converted into narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual capital, stabilized through imprinting and routines, and adapted by successors to balance continuity with change (Kammerlander et al., 2015; Galford & Maruca, 2006). This architecture explains heterogeneity in legacy outcomes across families and generations and sets the stage for examining when and how LSS forecasts sustainability and longevity.

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive, inductive multi-case design to theorize underexplored causal mechanisms within complex socio-organizational systems (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018).

Conceptualizing predecessor–successor identities as socially constructed and relationally negotiated (Hamilton, 2006) necessitated methods capable of capturing lived experience rather than abstracted metrics. To enhance validity and minimize bias, we conducted pilot interviews to refine protocols (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), triangulated data across primary and secondary sources (Jick, 1979), and employed courtroom-style questioning techniques to elicit factual accounts of observed behaviors rather than speculative interpretations (Langley & Meziani, 2020).

Sampling followed a purposeful theoretical logic (Miles & Huberman, 1994) complemented by snowball sampling to access information-rich cases and key informants within closed family-business networks. Initial participants were identified through professional associations and academic contacts; subsequent respondents were recruited via referrals from prior interviewees, leveraging trust-based ties to overcome access barriers typical in family firms. This combined approach ensured diversity across cultural and institutional contexts while maintaining theoretical relevance.

The final sample comprised seven multi-generational family firms operating in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia (see Table 1). Inclusion criteria required completion of at least one successful generational transition, explicit intent to transmit the firm to future generations, and a strong value-based identity aligned with stewardship principles (Aronoff & Ward, 2016). The sample included both SMEs and large, internationally active firms, including one century-old company that had transitioned to professionalized management—a theoretically salient contrast given governance implications for legacy continuity.

Table 1 around here

Data collection involved 20 semi-structured interviews averaging 70 minutes, conducted in English and Italian, supplemented by archival documents, press releases, and family-provided materials such as historical records and photographs (see Table 2). Interview protocols invited respondents to narrate firm history, strategic inflection points, succession experiences, and episodes where leader self-sacrifice (LSS) preceded or shaped legacy-related decisions. All participants provided informed consent and authorized anonymized use of data for scholarly purposes.

Data analysis followed a four-stage inductive process aligned with the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). First, case-level dossiers were developed to capture chronological narratives and sacrificial episodes. Second, open coding generated first-order concepts (e.g., “reward renunciation,” “leadership by example”). Third, axial coding clustered these into second-order themes (e.g., socioemotional behaviors, spiritual adherence) and aggregate dimensions representing legacy facets. Finally, cross-case comparison revealed patterned relationships, enabling the development of a process model positioning LSS as the causal origin of legacy dynamics.

Table 2 around here

Findings

Across heterogeneous contexts, leader self-sacrifice (LSS) consistently preceded and activated legacy dynamics. We organize findings into three facets — (1) Unintentional Building, (2) Shared Intentional Transmission, and (3) Intentional Preservation & Reframing—and show how LSS flows into sustainability through narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual channels. This itinerary, which starts from the facets of legacy to legacy sustainability, led us to conceive the interpretive model that we labeled “Leadership Legacy Sustainability Roadmap” that contributes to business longevity (see Fig. 1).

Facet 1: Unintentional Building

Founders often laid the groundwork without realizing they were constructing a legacy. Sacrificial acts included long hours, resource constraints, and prioritizing people over profit. [Founder]: *Everything else in the day frequently requires commitment and sacrifice; it was not easy, especially during the founding years. I did what I thought would put the person in the center. Leadership by example emerged as a powerful mechanism: [Founder]: I started involving my son at a young age, and he saw both my joys and my struggles; I never imagined that this would educate him more than what I would have preached to him with my words.* Spiritual adherence also surfaced: [Founder]: *You may certainly become an entrepreneur only to maximize profits and create money. It was something I knew I didn’t want to do from the beginning. I believed and felt it had to be something more than the financial outcome could ever provide, but it requires much sacrifice* (for further evidence, see Table 3). Building on these foundational acts, legacy moves from implicit

origins to a more deliberate stage where both predecessor and successor engage in reciprocal sacrifices.

Table 3 around here

Facet 2: Shared Intentional Transmission

Transmission occurs in a reciprocal space where both predecessor and successor calibrate sacrifices. [Predecessor]: *As he was growing, I was beside him, but I've always tried to give him the space he needed... I avoid unsolicited opinions because anyway, my thoughts belong to a story that has already been lived.* [Successor]: *I worked with my father and witnessed how he committed his life to the firm; even though I perceived him as a slave to his work at times, with no setting of boundaries, he is a son of his time. I learned a lot from him and from his mistakes. Crisis decisions illustrated shared intentionality:* [Predecessor]: *During the global financial crisis, we made one of the largest sacrifices we've ever faced. It was obvious that to save the firm, we would have had to fire dozens of employees, but we did not do so. We used our house as collateral for bank loans, which was risky and not economically logical. Yet I felt called to something more than economic logic; I believed I was called to something greater. My children were happy we did it together* (for further evidence, see Table 4). Once transmission is established, the challenge shifts to preserving core values while adapting to new realities, requiring successors to balance fidelity with transformation.

Table 4 around here

Facet 3: Intentional Preservation & Reframing

Successors balanced fidelity to transmitted values with adaptation to new realities. [Successor]: *My father did what he felt was right for him and for the business, but within his personal value systems. In some ways, the legacy of the company is to constantly change and reinvent yourself.* Transformation required discomfort: [Successor]: *If you want to fundamentally shift the business to a new space, you've actually got to go into step change and not incremental change because you've got to put a team in a space of discomfort to be able to really make proper change.* Spiritual motives underpinned continuity: [Successor]: *What drives me personally to build something enduring, I think, is to correspond to the unconditional love that I've received from my parents*

and from this society. In a sense, it can be said that it is 'loyalty to the love I received.' That, I believe, is the power that we will not allow to fade (for further evidence, see Table 5). Across these facets, firms convert sacrificial acts into enduring resources through narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual channels, which collectively sustain legacy and predict longevity.

Table 5 around here

From Sacrifice to Sustainability: Narrative, Socioemotional, and Spiritual Channels

Firms converted sacrificial acts into narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual capital. Narrative capital emerged through intergenerational stories: [Successor]: *Our parents would always remind us how my grandparents practiced service and sharing with a spirit of generosity... My grandparents were war survivors; they dedicated their whole lives to serving the poor.* Socioemotional capital surfaced as pride and contribution: [Successor]: *The truth is that without sacrifice, pride and satisfaction are of little value. It is precisely this spirit of sacrifice that has enabled us to become one of the most recognized brands.* Spiritual capital reflected purpose beyond profit: [Predecessor]: *I've always believed that I want to make a difference. And to have a big business gives you a vehicle in which you can actually make a difference.* Strategic sacrifices included professionalizing management when family talent was insufficient [Nonfamily executive]: *Getting beyond the third generation is very rare. They brought in professional management and recognized they did not have enough leadership. It provided long-term stability for the organization.* Interviewees also stressed boundaries: [Nonfamily executive]: *You need to have boundaries and find a balance. I know colleagues who sacrificed their families too much and got divorced, and then they ended up with health issues.*

Figure 1 around here

Robustness Checks and Propositions

To enhance the credibility of our theorizing, we conducted robustness checks and examined alternative explanations. First, we assessed the possibility of reverse causality—whether legacy considerations might induce leader self-sacrifice rather than the reverse. Temporal sequencing across cases consistently indicated that LSS preceded key legacy inflection points, such as founder-level decisions to defer personal rewards before any formal codification of legacy

narratives. Second, we analyzed negative cases where sacrificial behaviors were absent and observed markedly weaker narrative capital and more fragile transmission of values, reinforcing the generative role of LSS. Third, we explored cultural framing to determine whether the mechanism was context-dependent. While spiritual motives emerged as salient in several cultural settings, the underlying principle of voluntary cost-bearing as a credible signal of commitment demonstrated functional equivalence across diverse contexts, suggesting cross-cultural robustness (Hofstede, 1998).

Building on these findings, we advance four propositions that articulate the causal logic of our framework. First, leader self-sacrifice acts as a generative antecedent that initiates unintentional legacy building by creating origin narratives and trust-based relational norms. Second, during transmission, complementary sacrifices by predecessor and successor mediate continuity through reciprocity and boundary setting. Third, in the preservation and reframing phase, successor sacrifice underpins principled transformation, maintaining identity while adapting to environmental demands. Finally, the capitalization and strategic deployment of narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual mechanisms convert antecedent LSS into legacy sustainability, which in turn predicts business longevity.

Discussion

This study advances legacy scholarship by re-sequencing the theoretical architecture of leadership legacy in family firms, positioning leader self-sacrifice (LSS) as a generative antecedent rather than a derivative leadership attribute. Prior research has often conceptualized sacrifice as a leader characteristic correlated with effectiveness (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004; Choi & Maidalton, 1999), but our findings challenge this assumption by demonstrating that LSS initiates legacy-building processes through credible commitment signals and the creation of narrative capital. These sacrificial acts become embedded in organizational memory, forming identity scripts that successors appropriate and reinterpret. This perspective clarifies heterogeneity in legacy outcomes: leaders deeply embedded in duty enact higher costs when necessary, and these sacrifices seed stories that serve as substrates for continuity (Galford & Maruca, 2006; Whittington et al., 2005).

The transmission phase emerges as a fragile middle ground in the legacy continuum. Excessive predecessor control can suppress successor agency, while insufficient guidance risks value dilution. Our cases underscore reciprocity as an implicit contract (Osterloh & Frey, 2000), wherein both predecessor and successor bear calibrated costs to enable continuity. Sacrifice must remain bounded to avoid degenerating into suffering, which erodes family cohesion and organizational viability (Helin & Lindström, 2003). This insight introduces an ethical dimension to succession planning, emphasizing the need for boundaries that preserve health and relational integrity.

Beyond clarifying sequencing, this study contributes to socioemotional wealth (SEW) theory by illustrating how antecedent LSS is operationalized into multiple forms of capital—narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual (Bourdieu, 2018; Cottingham, 2016). These capitals function as conversion mechanisms that transform sacrificial acts into enduring organizational resources. Narrative capital codifies sacrifice into identity scripts that legitimize continuity; socioemotional capital strengthens relational bonds and trust; and spiritual capital anchors purpose beyond profit, reinforcing stewardship. When strategically deployed through governance choices such as professionalization, these capitals generate sustainability outcomes manifested in brand reputation, stakeholder trust, and transgenerational continuity (Napolitano, Marino, & Ojala, 2015). This operationalization bridges the gap between abstract socioemotional constructs and actionable governance practices, offering a more granular understanding of how values translate into longevity.

Our findings also illuminate the paradox of continuity: enduring stability requires calibrated discontinuity. Successors must preserve core values while introducing adaptive changes to remain competitive in volatile environments. Sacrificial acts thus serve as both anchors and levers—anchoring identity while legitimizing transformation. This duality enriches legacy theory by positioning sacrifice as a dynamic resource rather than a static virtue.

Finally, this research opens new theoretical avenues. It invites scholars to explore sacrifice as a signaling mechanism within stewardship theory, as a relational contract within social exchange frameworks, and as a moral resource within institutional logics. It also raises questions about the scalability of sacrificial norms in digitally transformed and ESG-driven contexts, where purpose narratives increasingly intersect with sustainability imperatives. By foregrounding LSS as a causal origin, this study offers a roadmap for integrating moral, relational, and strategic dimensions of leadership into models of organizational endurance.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for family-business governance and leadership practice. Families should institutionalize sacrificial norms through formal governance instruments such as a Legacy Charter, which codifies non-negotiable values, expected sacrificial behaviors, and ethical boundaries. This charter serves as a normative compass, ensuring that sacrifice remains volitional and generative rather than degenerating into suffering. Narrative stewardship should be embedded into organizational routines through archives, storytelling rituals, and structured succession handoffs. These practices transform sacrificial acts into enduring identity scripts, reinforcing continuity and commitment across generations.

Governance sacrifices—such as relinquishing control to professional managers when family talent is insufficient—should be reframed as strategic stewardship rather than as a failure of continuity. This reframing can mitigate resistance and foster legitimacy among stakeholders. Finally, firms should operationalize legacy sustainability through a Legacy KPI Dashboard, monitoring indicators such as employee retention during downturns, ethical compliance, community contributions, and successor engagement. These metrics provide tangible evidence of sacrificial behaviors translating into socioemotional and strategic outcomes, aligning values with performance.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to limitations that constrain generalizability. The interpretive, multi-case design prioritizes depth over breadth, limiting statistical inference. Cultural and religious frames may influence the moral valence of sacrifice, suggesting caution in extrapolating findings across contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs, such as cross-lagged panel studies and process tracing, to validate the temporal sequencing of LSS and legacy outcomes. Developing psychometrically robust scales to measure LSS—sensitive to volition, cost magnitude, and boundary conditions—would enable quantitative testing of our propositions.

Comparative studies of legacy-rich firms where sacrifice is absent could further interrogate the antecedent thesis, while exploring the role of non-family executives in stewarding legacy under sacrificial governance choices would enrich understanding of hybrid governance models. Additionally, examining the intersection of LSS with digital transformation, sustainability agendas, and ESG frameworks could extend the relevance of this framework to contemporary strategic challenges. Finally, cross-cultural research could illuminate how institutional logics and normative expectations shape the interpretation and operationalization of sacrifice in family firms.

Conclusion

This study reconfigures the theoretical architecture of leadership legacy in family firms by positioning leader self-sacrifice as a generative antecedent rather than a derivative attribute. Sacrificial acts, when capitalized and strategized through narrative, socioemotional, and spiritual mechanisms, convert into legacy sustainability and predict business longevity. By formalizing this causal chain, we offer both theoretical clarity and practical guidance for succession and governance. Ultimately, our findings underscore a paradox: enduring continuity requires calibrated discontinuity—leaders must sacrifice enough to serve yet set boundaries enough to endure. This insight provides a roadmap for families seeking to steward values across generations without sliding into suffering, ensuring that legacy remains a source of significance and stability in an increasingly volatile business environment. By foregrounding leader self-sacrifice as a causal origin, this study offers a roadmap for integrating moral, relational, and strategic dimensions into models of organizational endurance.

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