



Resilience and Family Business

28 & 29 April 2022 – workshop summary

Introduction

The Resilience and Family Business workshop (April 2022) drew together insight from Lancaster University research expertise in family business, gender/leadership, sustainability and work; family business associations and practitioners as well as participants who are focused on resilience across several domains. Taken together, the propositions that underpinned the workshop were that:

1. Organisations face challenges that require them to adapt and develop in such a way as to continue to provide goods/services, employment and returns to their owners and that these challenges come from a multitude of sources.
2. Family business constitutes a substantial part of any economy and, as such, their ability to be resilient will be critical to wider systems resilience.
3. The particular dynamics at play in family business in terms of inter-generational thinking, and purposeful strategies may provide special opportunities for innovation in this context.
4. Resilience may feed into a series of capacities that could be framed as: absorptive, adaptive and transformative.

Alongside these possibilities, it was also highlighted that resilience may not always be a 'good thing', especially when resilience perpetuates, for example, gender biases that affect a family business's ability to flourish and adapt to change.

The artist's material shared over lunch can be found here: <https://www.tonebjordam.com/>

Presentation materials

Insights on the meaning of resilience from the co-organisers' perspectives can be found on the webpage summarising the workshop. There are also links to the presentation slides from the day: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/pentland/news-and-events/resilience-family-business-2022/>.

What participants said at the end of the day

The closing session of the workshop provided space for participants to explore four questions, namely:

1. What are the consistent themes/perspectives that have emerged across the two days?
2. What distinctive aspects have emerged among and between the various perspectives considered?
3. What do you know now that you didn't know before the workshop?
4. What would next steps be in this conversation space (for policy, practice & research)?

Table 1: Synthesis of responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 focused on insights from the workshop

Themes are listed in alphabetical order while noting that there is likely particular relationships between them. Understanding and articulating these linkages will be the subject of future collaboration.

- **Complexity:** There was a recognition of the complexity of transformations sought and, as a result, it is difficult to disentangle actions and consequences. These changes are likely to be non-linear and outcomes will be uncertain.
- **Context matters:** Interpretations, agency and action depend on context specific interpretations of the problems. Change will also happen in a particular place, so context is highly influential.
- **Diversity:** Diversity promotes resilience: be that diversity of thought, ecological diversity or economic diversity. Diversity of knowledge was also recognized as a prerequisite for crossing over disciplinary and practice silos. Sometimes we use terms such as 'giving voice' which implies that someone gives permission for others to speak. In contrast, framing this as 'honouring voices' is more inclusive and restores agency to those speaking.
- **Embeddedness and Community:** Resilience is often related to being embedded in a place, community, collective or value system, all of which can facilitate and/or impede resilience.
- **Family business complexity:** the 'family system' is entangled with the business system and hence resilience of the business depend on how the family system is constructed. For example, family members that were made invisible in the past may emerge as leaders in new contexts and play a key role in making the business survive and thrive.
- **Power:** The role of power in sustaining the status quo as well as initiating and sustaining change infused the workshop. Questions include: who has the power to initiate and drive change, who makes what happen and how is legitimacy achieved? To change, the powerful may have to give up some power while others have to develop capacity to exercise their agency.
- **Resilience is multi-faceted:** Resilience includes positive and negative aspects. Resilience can be positive in terms of coping with shocks but also negative in the form of resistance to taking action that is needed.
- **Responsibility:** Consequences arise from both taking and not taking action. This raises the question of who is responsible in any problem setting, how responsibility is assigned and how to accommodate joint responsibility.
- **Spanning boundaries:** To overcome problem and solution complexity, collaboration is essential. To support collaboration there is a need to make challenges digestible and relevant to a diverse stakeholder group. Nurturing and developing resilience also require us to span boundaries and connect the different layers and systems (namely, biosphere, society, economy, organizations, individuals).
- **Transparency:** goes hand in hand with responsibility and is one of the pre-requisites for accountability. Transparency is key to understanding actions and their consequences including transparency at institutional level and of norms, actions, knowledge and relationships.
- **Urgency:** there is a need for urgent action to tackle complex problems, especially those around environmental change. Change is coming to the physical system in which family business operates and will create resilience challenges.

Next steps

Workshop participants were clear that more conversations were warranted on resilience in family business, including:

1. Deepening understanding of concepts that underpinned the workshop (such as resilience itself) and the notion of stewardship (and including the idea of entrepreneurial stewardship). The broad idea of stewarding natural and other resources was found to have salience for workshop participants but also engendered reservations around the potentially patriarchal/colonial connotations of the word. The term guardianship was mooted as a potentially less problematic word, especially drawing from indigenous peoples' understandings of the intimate and non-hierarchical relationship between people and nature and the need for both to flourish together.

Unpacking stewardship further resulted in aspects of care, knowledge and agency being highlighted as creating the possibilities for stewardship. Being 'anchor assets' and custodianship also arose as important concepts. In addition, there was interest in seeking to understand what makes resilience/stewardship/guardianship a distinctive idea and how they might do more 'work' in practice, policy and academic settings.

2. Question 2 responses are captured in Table 2, and form the basis from which follow-on work from the workshop is proposed.

Table 2: What would next steps be in this conversation space (for policy, practice & research)?

The responses gathered at the workshop have been synthesised into a series of metaphors that suggest different forms of future engagement and discussions.

- **Ecosystem metaphor:** there is a need to bring diverse actors to conversations around resilience to ensure cross-pollination of perspectives and potential next steps. The purpose is for 'roots' to emerge and for a diverse 'forest' of actors to develop.
- **Puzzle:** projects may take shape based on the workshop (and beyond) discussions. There is no set structure or image as to what the project may look like, which will be enabled by finding a common 'table' in which to put the pieces of the puzzle together where everyone brings a piece.
- **Picture:** we might usefully study situations (pictures) where resilience has emerged in the past. One outcome of picture painting may be to inform business and management curriculum development for students and family business members. In other language, the idea of developing good 'pictures' is identifying the 'seeds of what 'good' may look like' (see here for an example of a project: <https://goodanthropocenes.net/>). Other times these are called lighthouses.
- **Movie:** the conversations are not static - they are expected to take place over time and periodically. The idea is to keep putting the puzzle together and work together to create a more nuanced picture of resilience in family business. Every project can serve as a way to put a motion picture together. One year it can relate to education, the next one to aspects such as gender, or environmentalism. In that way the narrative keeps the pieces together about resilience.

In practice, these metaphors have led us to the following actions:

1. Developing structured conversations around resilience in family business:
 - a. We will develop a series of round table conversations with family business members about how they respond in times of crisis and how these insights might help us identify pieces of the picture for resilience in family business;
 - b. We will engage with family business representative groups to further explore the themes developed in the workshop.
2. We will conduct a wider ranging survey of resilience in family business, drawing from the above conversations.
3. We will develop protocols for starting to identify engaging examples of where family business has navigated various challenges in ways that have built resilience across multiple domains that could be captured under the notion of stewardship or guardianship. The scales at which resilience might emerge (micro, meso and macro) and inter-relations between scales are likely to be salient in terms of how to navigate challenges.

If you would like to join us on for any element of these next steps, please be in touch with us at pentlandcentre@lancaster.ac.uk.

Jan Bebbington ([Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business](#))

Allan Discua Cruz ([Centre for Family Business](#))

Ben Harrison ([the Work Foundation](#))

Valerie Stead ([Academy for Gender, Work and Leadership](#))



Academy for Gender,
Work and Leadership

