

# Exploring the Nonprofit Organization Founder Experience



How Nonprofit Organization Founding Executive Leaders Assign  
Meaning to Their Experience with Succession Planning:  
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

**By**

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# Research Problem & Research Question

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- Most nonprofit organizations face a succession of leadership during the life of the organization if the organization is going to exist past the founding executive leader.
- Nonprofit organization leaders acknowledge the importance of succession planning; yet, succession planning in most nonprofit organizations is nonexistent.
- *What meaning do nonprofit organization founding executive leaders assign to their experience with succession planning?*

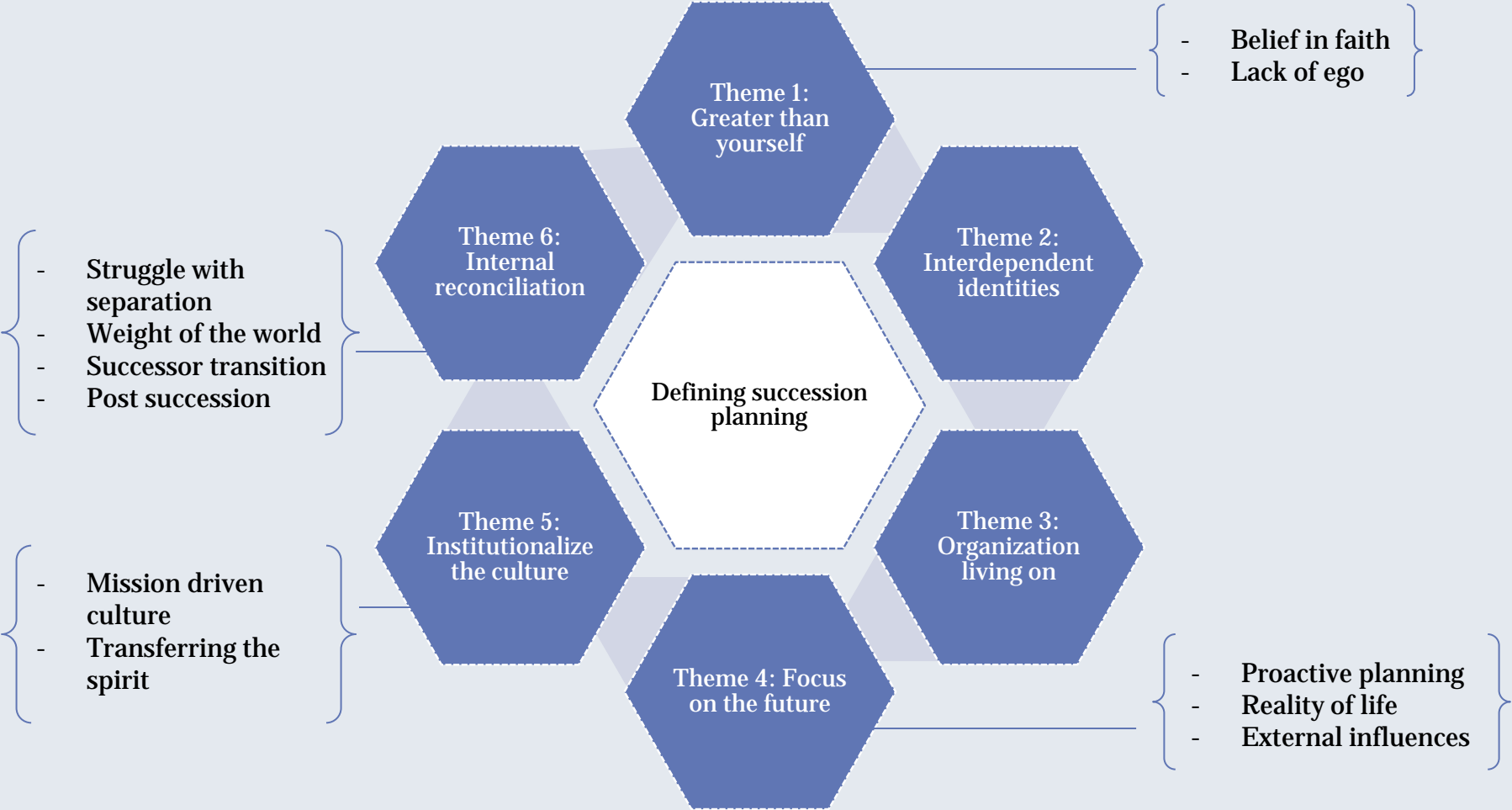
# Research Methodology

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- *Explore the meaning that nonprofit founding executive leaders assign to their experience with succession planning*
- Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)
- A purposeful sample of founding executive leaders
- Nonprofit organizations in New York State
- In-person semi-structured interviews (n=7)
- Not a single prescribed method for data analysis in IPA research

# Study Findings

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# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Defining  
succession  
planning

- Participants' definition very different
- Important to understand each definition to highlight meaning of participant's experience
- Common language a key need
- Activities may not be defined as succession planning, even though occurring at multiple levels

# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Theme 1:  
Greater than  
yourself

- A purpose greater than the founder
- Guided by belief in faith
- The organization is not about me – lack of ego
- A calling to do the work
- Foundational component of succession planning
- Can strengthen the separation of identity

# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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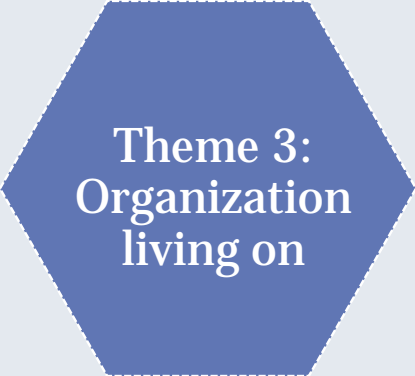


Theme 2:  
Interdependent  
identities

- Interdependent relationship between the founder and the organization
- Founder needs the organization as much as the organization needs the founder
- Understandable during the creation phase
- Significant consequences if no separation

# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Theme 3:  
Organization  
living on

- The organization should live on
- Organization should not die with the founder
- Size and breadth greater than imagined
- Impact and need in the community
- Significant step in separating from the organization



# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Theme 4:  
Focus on the  
future

- Proactive steps to plan
- Result of life circumstances
- Influence of external stakeholders
- Evidence of planning for the future
- If belief that organization should live on, natural next step is a focus on the future

# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Theme 5:  
Institutionalize  
the culture

- Building a shared experience
- Evidence of demonstrated passion for the mission
- Important to create and foster a mission driven culture
- Transferring the spirit of the organization to others

# Major Discussion Points of Findings

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Theme 6:  
Internal  
reconciliation

- Reality of a changing relationship
- Weight of the world
- Participate in successor selection and transition
- Role after their transition

# The Theoretical Lens: Interpretation of Findings

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- The participants' **positive attitude** about succession planning;
- the high degree to which they believe they have **control** over succession planning;
- the **influence of others**, including staff, the board of directors, and funders on the founding executive leader's **intentionality to engage in succession planning**;
- may be influencing how they assign meaning to their experience with succession planning.

# Recommendations for Improved Practice

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- Create a shared definition succession planning
- Acknowledge and appreciate the substantial work required to engage in succession planning
- Explore a guided approach to preparing for succession planning

# Questions to Consider

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- How do we continue to work on created space to think about, talk about, and engage in succession planning?
- What steps can I take as a founder or as an individual who supports a founder to start the conversation about succession planning?

# Contact Information

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