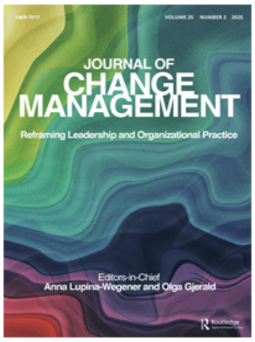

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Understanding Commitment to Change in Family and Non-Family Business: The Role of Psychological Ownership and Open and Transparent Communication

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ABSTRACT

Organizational change is essential for business adaptability, yet its success depends on employees' commitment to change. This study explores the role of psychological ownership and open and transparent communication in shaping commitment to change within family and non-family firms. Using moderated mediation modelling on data from 501 employees across 14 Italian firms, findings reveal that psychological ownership fully mediates the relationship between open and transparent communication and commitment to change, with distinct effects based on business status (i.e. family vs. non-family). In family firms, psychological ownership fosters affective commitment by strengthening emotional bonds and identification with the organization. In non-family firms, psychological ownership reinforces normative commitment by fostering a sense of duty and professional responsibility. These findings highlight the critical role of psychological ownership as a mediator between strategic communication and commitment to change. When employees develop a genuine sense of ownership over the change process, they are more motivated to accept and sustain it, regardless of whether the organization is family-owned or non-family-owned. These findings contribute to change management literature and provide practical suggestions for adapting transformation strategies to different business status.

MAD statement

This study contributes to change management literature by demonstrating how psychological ownership mediates the relationship between transparent communication and commitment to change across different governance contexts. Drawing on Stewardship Theory, it introduces the concepts of *Heartfelt Stewardship* in family firms and *Duty-Bound Stewardship* in non-family firms, revealing how emotional and normative mechanisms differently sustain affective and normative commitment. By reframing stewardship as a context-dependent, psychologically grounded process, the study provides both theoretical advancement and practical guidance for tailoring change strategies that foster authentic employee engagement and align with the organization's governance logic.

KEYWORDS

Stewardship theory; organizational change; commitment to change; open and transparent communication; psychological ownership; family and non-family business

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Introduction

The contemporary business environment is increasingly characterized by rapid technological change, evolving market demands, and global economic volatility. These dynamics require agile strategies, effective change management, and flexible organizational structures that promote continuous innovation and adaptability (By, 2005; By et al., 2011; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Schwarz et al., 2021). However, the success of change initiatives depends not only on strategic planning but also on governance mechanisms and organizational form, both of which shape decision-making processes and influence employee commitment (Klein et al., 2019).

Governance – broadly defined as the exercise of authority within organizations (Tricker, 1997) – plays a pivotal role in enabling organizational transformation by fostering accountability, transparency, and alignment with strategic objectives (Aguilera et al., 2008; Zona et al., 2013). Effective governance frameworks cultivate environments in which individuals act responsibly, support collective interests, and align with organizational goals (Daily et al., 2003; Huse, 2007). Despite its relevance, governance in the context of change management is frequently examined through a narrow lens, emphasizing board composition and executive leadership while neglecting other critical dimensions such as ownership structure, business status (e.g. family vs. non-family firms), governance logics, and communication practices (Daily & Dalton, 1993; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Zahra & Pearce, 1989). Notably, limited attention has been paid to how these dimensions influence the psychological mechanisms underpinning employees' engagement with organizational change.

This gap is especially evident when comparing family and non-family firms. Family businesses often rely on informal, identity-based governance mechanisms, which are deeply rooted in emotional bonds and intergenerational continuity. In contrast, non-family firms typically embrace formal, rule-based governance structures that prioritize performance metrics and external accountability (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006). These differing logics shape employees' responses to change, particularly in terms of motivation, trust in leadership, and emotional engagement (Henssen et al., 2014; Mustafa et al., 2023).

Family firms – defined as organizations in which the family retains strategic control and prioritizes legacy preservation (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003; Chrisman et al., 2011; Ward, 1987) – constitute a significant portion of businesses globally (Carney, 2005). While such firms often benefit from long-term vision and socioemotional wealth preservation, these same characteristics can also foster resistance to change when family priorities conflict with organizational goals (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2013). Conversely, non-family firms are typically marked by more formalized governance structures, standardized processes, and professional management systems, contributing to a more bureaucratic and performance-driven environment (Chrisman et al., 2010; Songini & Gnan, 2015). This professionalization has been linked to enhanced clarity in roles and expectations, potentially improving psychological readiness for change (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003; Klein et al., 2005).

Scholars have long debated whether family firms are inherently more or less adaptable than non-family firms. On one hand, a strong attachment to tradition and a desire to protect socioemotional wealth can hinder responsiveness to market shifts (Chrisman &

Patel, 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Naldi et al., 2007). On the other hand, under certain conditions, family firms have demonstrated significant adaptability and innovation, often surpassing non-family counterparts in resilience and strategic flexibility (Brunelli et al., 2024; De Massis et al., 2015; Erdogan et al., 2020; Rondi et al., 2018). A stewardship mindset – grounded in a long-term orientation and entrepreneurial commitment – can enable family firms to align core values with strategic goals, facilitating transformative change (Cennamo et al., 2012; Floris & Dettori, 2024; Zellweger & Sieger, 2012).

Rather than simply asking whether family firms are more or less change-oriented, this study investigates how governance structures – specifically family versus non-family ownership – shape the psychological dynamics underlying employee engagement with change. We propose that these differences arise from distinct governance logics: one based on affective ownership and identity continuity, the other grounded in formal control and professional accountability. This study focuses on employees' commitment to change (CT), defined as the willingness to support and engage in organizational transformation (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2021). CT manifests in three forms: affective commitment (AC), driven by belief in the change's value; normative commitment (NC), driven by a perceived obligation; and continuance commitment (CC), driven by perceived costs of resisting change (Meyer et al., 1993; Jaros, 2010).

Despite extensive research on CT, its antecedents remain underexplored (Feng et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2001), particularly regarding psychological ownership (PO) and communication support (CS). Although prior studies have examined PO and CS individually, little is known about their interaction across governance contexts and their joint influence on CT.

PO refers to an individual's sense of ownership and responsibility toward the organization, often enhancing engagement and proactive behaviours (Avey et al., 2009; Pierce et al., 2003; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). However, its impact on change is debated. Some scholars argue that PO may increase resistance due to protective instincts (Pierce et al., 2001), while others suggest it fosters identification with change and enhances commitment (Chen & Wang, 2007; Han et al., 2010). In family firms, PO is often associated with socioemotional wealth and tends to reinforce affective commitment (Dessì et al., 2023; Pittino et al., 2018). In contrast, in non-family firms, PO may strengthen normative commitment as employees feel duty-bound to support organizational goals (Liu et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2001).

Similarly, CS is widely acknowledged as a critical enabler of change (Bordia et al., 2004; Luo et al., 2016; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). By reducing uncertainty and building trust, effective CS enhances employee understanding and acceptance of change (Allen et al., 2007; Men, 2014). Yet CS practices differ across business types: family firms may limit information sharing to maintain privacy and cohesion, which may alienate non-family employees (Dyer, 1986), while non-family firms typically adopt open CS approaches to foster participation and alignment (Sultan et al., 2017).

To explore the interaction between governance structure, PO, and CS, this study adopts Stewardship Theory (Davis et al., 1997), which explains how individuals internalize responsibility within different organizational systems. From this perspective, governance differences extend beyond ownership and decision-making to include psychological and cultural influences on employee behaviour (Henssen et al., 2014; Mustafa et al., 2023).

Research Questions:

1. How do PO and CS influence employees' commitment to change in family and non-family businesses?
2. To what extent does business status (family vs. non-family) moderate these relationships?

To address these questions, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using data from 501 employees across 14 Italian firms – 63.9% from family businesses and 36.1% from non-family firms. This approach allowed us to examine the conditional relationships in our framework and understand how governance structure shapes the psychological drivers of CT.

Italy presents a particularly relevant context for this investigation. Italian firms are deeply rooted in tradition (Cosentino et al., 2020; Dettori et al., 2020; Masino, 2021) yet face increasing pressure to adapt to global competition and changing market conditions (Hall et al., 2009). While family firms are the backbone of the Italian economy, they often grapple with challenges such as generational succession and a lack of formal strategic planning (Deloitte, 2019). This coexistence of family and non-family firms under similar institutional conditions but with contrasting governance logics offers a compelling setting for comparative analysis.

This study makes three key contributions. First, it advances the stewardship theory by framing stewardship as a governance logic that varies according to business status. We identify two forms: emotional/identity-based stewardship in family firms and professional/role-based stewardship in non-family firms. Second, the study contributes to CT literature by identifying PO as a core mechanism linking governance context to different CT types. Third, it highlights how CS interacts with PO to reinforce governance-specific stewardship logic and shape employee engagement with change.

Theoretical Background and Development Hypotheses

Stewardship Theory and Organizational Change

The Stewardship Theory, developed by Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson (1997), presents a human-centered approach to governance by positing that organizational actors – particularly those in leadership roles – are intrinsically motivated to act in the best interests of the organization rather than for personal gain. In contrast to agency theory, which is grounded in economic assumptions and emphasizes extrinsic incentives and control mechanisms, stewardship theory underscores intrinsic motivation, psychological ownership, and organizational identification. According to Davis et al. (1997), stewards are collectivist, pro-organizational, and self-determined individuals whose behaviours align with organizational goals because they derive fulfilment from contributing to the organization's success. Such behaviours emerge when governance systems promote trust, autonomy, and long-term orientation – what Davis and colleagues define as the psychological and situational antecedents of stewardship.

Stewardship theory offers a strong theoretical foundation for examining how governance can enable or inhibit employees' commitment to change (CT), particularly through intrinsic motivation, trust, and shared vision. Unlike coercive or normative approaches, stewardship emphasizes the relational and value-driven aspects of organizational transformation. Governance – including ownership structure, board composition, and decision-making mechanisms – plays a critical role across all stages of change implementation (Aguilera et al., 2008; Tricker, 1997; Zona et al., 2013). It influences resource allocation, shapes strategic priorities, and guides stakeholder engagement (Daily et al., 2003; Huse, 2007). Chrisman (2019) argue that receptiveness to change depends on governance's ability to activate stewardship behaviours, which are influenced by ownership structure and the underlying values of the organization.

Governance decisions also directly affect leadership effectiveness, widely acknowledged as a key enabler of successful change (By, 2005; Kotter, 1996). Leaders who model desired behaviours, communicate transparently, and align transformation strategies with organizational culture tend to cultivate greater trust and employee engagement (Gill, 2002; Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Governance can either support or undermine this leadership by institutionalizing accountability and promoting transparent decision-making (Burnes, 2004; Moran & Brightman, 2001; Rieley & Clarkson, 2001; Senior, 2002). Robust governance structures further enhance an organization's ability to manage resistance, involve employees early, and provide adequate training and development (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). These mechanisms also reinforce transparency and trust, which are essential to navigating complex change processes (Daily et al., 2003; Huse, 2007).

The relevance of stewardship theory becomes particularly pronounced when contrasting family and non-family firms. It provides a nuanced lens to explore how business status – and the associated governance models – shape organizational change. The theory suggests that intrinsic motivation to serve the collective good may lead to divergent outcomes depending on governance configuration, cultural values, and identity anchors within the firm. This perspective helps explain why some family firms demonstrate adaptability and resilience, while others resist change, and why non-family firms may excel in structural efficiency but often lack deep emotional engagement with transformational processes.

Commitment to Change in Family and Non-Family Firms

As discussed above, Stewardship Theory offers a theoretical lens to understand how different governance models shape the motivational underpinnings of commitment to change (CT). CT refers to the psychological force – or mindset – that binds an individual to actions perceived as essential for successfully implementing a change initiative (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). It is a widely examined construct (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2021) and is recognized as a key determinant of change outcomes (Naseer et al., 2023; Alqudah et al., 2022; Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021).

CT manifests in three forms: affective commitment (AC), normative commitment (NC), and continuance commitment (CC) (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). AC reflects a desire to support change based on perceived organizational benefits; NC derives from a sense of obligation and moral responsibility; CC is driven by perceived costs or disadvantages of not supporting the change. While CC is often associated with behavioural compliance in medium – and long-term transformation (Jaros, 2010), it is not always beneficial. Employees may commit to change because they want to (AC), feel they ought to (NC), or believe they have no alternative (CC). However, these forms of CT vary in their contribution to change success. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) suggest that AC, rooted in positive appraisals of change, acts as a buffer against stress and enhances employees' adaptability. Conversely, CC – often stemming from a lack of perceived choice – may increase stress and resistance, ultimately hindering change implementation.

A range of contextual variables influence CT, including organizational tenure, prior exposure to change, self-efficacy, participation, availability of information, and relationships with managers and peers (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Although extensively studied, the antecedents of CT continue to attract scholarly interest (Feng et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2001). In particular, governance has emerged as a critical yet underexplored factor (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Gollagari et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2012), especially in the context of family and non-family firms, where its impact on CT diverges (Azoury et al., 2013; Sieger et al., 2011).

Stewardship behaviours differ between family and non-family firms due to distinct motivational structures, governance configurations, and cultural foundations. In family businesses, stewardship is commonly grounded in socioemotional attachment, identity fusion, and a desire for intergenerational continuity (Chrisman, 2019). Family leaders often adopt stewardship roles not because of formal incentive systems but out of intrinsic identification with the firm's legacy. This motivation promotes higher levels of affective and normative commitment, particularly when change initiatives align with core family values (Vallejo, 2009; Henssen et al., 2014). Such leadership fosters trust-based environments where employees feel morally invested in the organization's goals (Salvato et al., 2004; Carrasco-Hernández & Jimenez 2012). However, this same attachment to tradition may hinder responsiveness when change threatens continuity or disrupts established family norms (Chua et al., 1999).

In contrast, non-family firms rely more on formalized governance systems, meritocratic processes, and professionalized leadership. In these contexts, stewardship behaviours stem less from emotional or familial identification and more from organizational values, ethical norms, and professional commitment. While leaders in non-family firms may still exhibit stewardship, their legitimacy typically derives from performance and shared organizational goals, not lineage. Consequently, CT is more often supported through normative mechanisms such as role clarity, transparent communication, and strategic alignment – rather than emotional bonds (Sieger et al., 2011; Sultan et al., 2017). Although such firms may demonstrate greater agility due to standardized procedures, they may also lack the deep relational trust and emotional engagement found in family businesses.

PO and Its Influence on CT

Psychological ownership (PO) refers to the sense of possessiveness and responsibility employees feel toward their organization, often expressed through statements such as 'my company' or 'my project' (Pierce et al., 1991, 2003). By satisfying core needs for control, identity, and belonging, PO fosters emotional attachment, proactive behaviour, and alignment between individual and organizational goals (Avey et al., 2009; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). These dynamics can significantly influence commitment to change (CT), as individuals who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to engage in innovation, strategic initiatives, and problem-solving (Dawkins et al., 2017; Lee & Suh, 2015). Empirical studies show that a heightened sense of ownership enhances dedication to organizational transformation (Chen & Wang, 2007; Han et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2019).

According to Stewardship Theory, individuals with strong psychological ties to the organization are intrinsically motivated to act in its best interests, demonstrating trust, loyalty, and long-term commitment (Davis et al., 1997; Salvato et al., 2004). When employees or leaders adopt a stewardship mindset, PO transcends defensiveness or territoriality and becomes a catalyst for proactive engagement and selfless contribution to collective goals (Henssen et al., 2014).

However, PO can also hinder CT, particularly when individuals perceive change initiatives as threats to what they 'own' (Pierce et al., 2001). Because PO fosters a protective orientation toward one's domain – be it a task, team, or the entire organization – employees may resist changes that disrupt familiar roles, routines, or traditions (Avey et al., 2009; Han et al., 2010).

This tension is especially salient in family firms, where PO is deeply intertwined with socioemotional wealth and organizational identity (Dessì et al., 2023; Pittino et al., 2018). On one hand, a strong sense of ownership may enhance commitment to sustaining the business across generations (Michael-Tsabari et al., 2008; Sieger et al., 2011), making family members more receptive to changes that preserve continuity. In this sense, collective-oriented PO, often embodied in transgenerational stewardship, can reinforce affective commitment to change when aligned with long-term family goals (Mustafa et al., 2023; Henssen et al., 2014). On the other hand, this deep-rooted identification may generate resistance when proposed transformations are perceived as threatening the family legacy, values, or control (Rantanen & Jussila, 2011).

In contrast, non-family firms often cultivate PO through formal mechanisms such as participative decision-making, transparent communication, and inclusive management practices (Bernhard & O'Driscoll, 2011; Pierce et al., 2001). In these organizations, PO typically supports a normative commitment to the firm (Chen & Wang, 2007; Liu et al., 2019). While stewardship behaviours may not emerge organically, they can be intentionally fostered through governance systems that promote autonomy, alignment, and shared purpose (Vallejo, 2009). However, employees may still resist change when they feel excluded from decisions or perceive a threat to their status and autonomy linked to PO (Mayhew et al., 2007; O'Driscoll et al., 2006). Thus, promoting PO without undermining perceived control is key to enhancing CT and mitigating resistance.

In sum, the impact of PO on CT is context-dependent and shaped by both organizational form and governance structure. In family firms, emotional attachment may amplify support or exacerbate resistance depending on whether change aligns with core family values (Davis et al., 1997; Mustafa et al., 2023). In non-family firms, PO is more strongly tied to institutional practices, which can also trigger committed engagement – or defensive opposition. Based on these dual outcomes, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: PO influences employees' CT, differently between family and non-family firms.

CS and Its Influence on CT

One of the greatest challenges employees encounter during organizational change is the uncertainty surrounding the process and its potential outcomes (Bordia et al., 2004).

This uncertainty typically arises from limited or vague information about how the change will unfold, its specific objectives, and its implications for individual roles and responsibilities (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Men & Stachs, 2014; Oreg et al., 2018). When employees are unable to anticipate the trajectory of change, they often experience psychological strain, manifesting as anxiety, stress, or resistance. Uncertainty related to job security, organizational structure, or career development intensifies employees' vulnerability and undermines CT.

In this context, communication support (CS) emerges as a pivotal driver of CT, enabling successful organizational transformation. By proactively delivering accurate, timely, and comprehensive information, communication reduces employee apprehension and fosters predictability and trust (Allen et al., 2007; Men, 2014). In doing so, it not only mitigates resistance to change (Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2019), but also facilitates the development of a shared commitment to transformation (Luo et al., 2016; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

Particularly important is participatory communication, which actively involves employees in the formulation, discussion, and refinement of change initiatives. This approach enhances transparency, reinforces PO, and fosters the perception that organizational goals are genuinely shared (Lee & Li, 2020). When individuals feel that their input matters, a sense of ownership emerges that strengthens accountability and deepens responsibility for the organization's future (Pierce et al., 2003).

This dynamic is especially evident in family firms**,** where stewards often embrace a relational and moral view of communication. For them, communication is not merely an instrumental tool, but a form of stewardship – aligned with long-term goals, trust-building, and a sense of duty to protect collective interests (Salvato et al., 2004; Henssen et al., 2014). In such contexts, communication deepens employees' CT through a sense of shared purpose and perceived fairness (Vallejo, 2009).

However, despite these advantages, family and non-family firms differ significantly in their communication practices. Family businesses often prioritize confidentiality and internal cohesion, which can limit information sharing – especially toward non-family employees (Dyer, 1986). While this discretion may protect sensitive matters, it may also unintentionally foster feelings of exclusion, reduce transparency, and obscure the rationale behind change efforts. As a result, non-family employees may struggle to develop a sense of PO and CT (Rantanen & Jussila, 2011).

In contrast, non-family firms are more likely to implement open and participatory communication systems (Sultan et al., 2017). These approaches promote a culture of transparency, collaboration, and joint problem-solving. Employees are encouraged to understand, and in some cases co-shape, the strategic direction of change. This involvement enhances perceived ownership and increases their willingness to support – or even champion – organizational transformation (Men, 2014; Yue et al., 2019).

Moreover, clearly communicating the purpose, methods, and anticipated outcomes of organizational change – especially in contexts of innovation or strategic renewal – can significantly reinforce PO. When individuals feel that their voices are valued, they develop a stronger sense of control, which in turn mitigates fears related to role insecurity, loss of autonomy, or identity threats (Avey et al., 2009; Bordia et al., 2004; Pierce et al., 2001). In this way, CS not only reduces uncertainty and increases CT, but also nurtures the PO that underpins employees' engagement with change.

Based on these insights, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a: CS influences CT differently between family and non-family firms.

H2b: CS influences PO differently between family and non-family firms.

In this sense, these hypotheses aim to deepen the understanding of how CS can shape employees' PO and CT, in the context of family and non-family firms (see Figure 1)

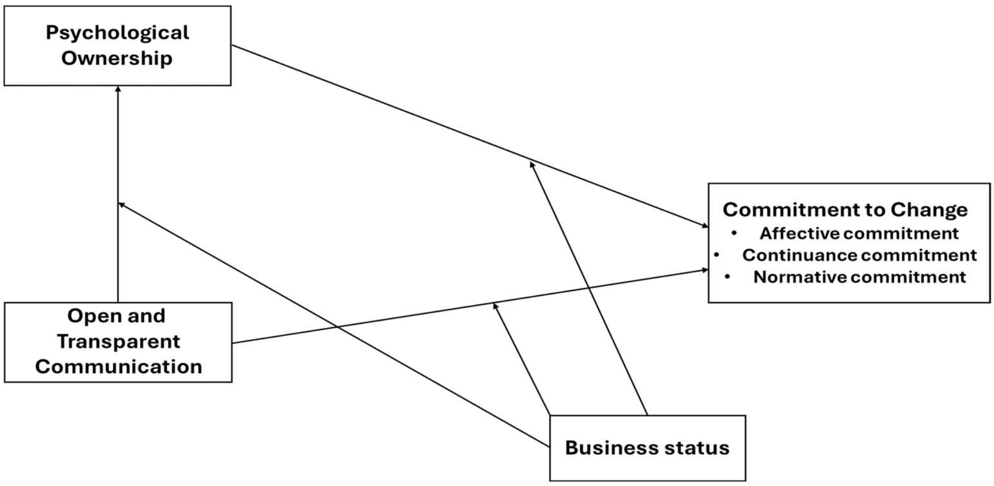

Figure 1. Hypothesised conceptual model.

Method

Sample and Data Collection

This study adopts a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) complemented by snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to identify firms that align with the research objectives. Given the focus on commitment to change, psychological ownership, and open and transparent communication in family and non-family businesses, selecting firms that had undergone significant organizational transformation was crucial. Specific inclusion criteria were applied to ensure the selected companies' relevance. Firms must have undertaken at least one major organizational change initiative in the past two years, such as corporate restructuring, digital transformation, sustainability transitions, leadership succession, or strategic repositioning. They were classified as family or non-family businesses based on the framework of Astrachan and Shanker (2003), which considers ownership concentration, governance structure, and generational involvement. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether their company met these criteria through a direct question, ensuring that classification was based on self-reported governance structures rather than external assumptions. To allow for meaningful insights into organizational change, only companies with at least 50 employees were included, ensuring the presence of formalized governance structures and decision-making processes. The sample encompassed firms from different industries, including manufacturing, services, retail, and technology. It was geographically distributed across Northern, Central, and Southern Italy, including the Islands, to account for potential regional differences in business status structure and change processes.

Italy represents an ideal setting for this study due to its economic structure, where family-owned businesses are highly prevalent, and the unique governance and cultural dynamics that influence organizational change. Approximately 85% of private firms in Italy are family-owned (Deloitte, 2019), and socio-emotional wealth considerations strongly shape decision-making (Berrone et al., 2012), where legacy preservation, risk aversion, and family identity play a central role. While these factors contribute to strong psychological ownership and commitment to change, they can also lead to organizational inertia, resistance to change, and hierarchical decision-making structures (Chrisman et al., 2015a). Unlike Anglo-Saxon economies, where ownership is often more dispersed, Italian firms maintain high levels of family control, influencing their governance and employee engagement (Gnan et al., 2015). Additionally, cultural characteristics such as high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001) contribute to more vigorous resistance to change, making Italy a particularly relevant context for analyzing how psychological ownership and communication influence employees' commitment to change in family and non-family businesses. Moreover, Italian firms face increasing external pressures linked to Industry 4.0, sustainability policies, and post-pandemic transformations, which require organizations to adapt to new business models (Amenta et al., 2022; Amicarelli et al., 2024; Muto et al., 2024). These factors make Italy valuable for examining the interplay between business status, resistance to change, and employee engagement.

The selection process began with a purposive sampling approach, identifying ten firms through direct contacts with industry associations, business networks, and academic partnerships. To expand the sample and enhance representativeness, snowball sampling was employed by leveraging key informants, such as owners, senior executives, and HR managers, who referred additional firms that met the selection criteria. This approach extended the final sample to fourteen companies, including organizations with diverse business status and change experiences. Theoretical saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1979), meaning that additional data collection did not yield new insights regarding the relationships between psychological ownership, communication, and commitment to change. Saturation was assessed by continuously monitoring the emergence of new patterns in the data, following the approach of Guest et al. (2006), confirming that the collected responses provided a comprehensive representation of the phenomena under investigation.

An online questionnaire was administered across the fourteen selected companies between April 2023 and August 2023 to understand employee perceptions and engagement with change. The company distribution was the following: 9 family firms (64.3%) and 5 non-family firms (35.7%). Out of 620 distributed surveys, 524 were returned, and 23 incomplete responses were removed, resulting in a final dataset of 501 valid responses and an overall response rate of 80.8%. The dataset comprised 63.9% employees from family businesses (N = 320) and 36.1% from non-family businesses (N = 181), allowing for a meaningful comparison of governance influences on organizational change.

The demographic composition of the sample reflected a balanced distribution of employee characteristics. The gender distribution included 63.5% male respondents

Table 1. Sample characteristics distribution.

Variable		*N*	%
Gender	Man	318	63.5
	Woman	183	36.5
Age	18–30	131	26.2
	31–40	134	26.8
	41–50	108	21.6
	51–60	105	21
	Over 60	22	4.4
Business status	Family business	320	63.9
	Non-family business	181	36.1

(N = 318) and 36.5% female respondents (N = 183). Regarding age, 26.2% of participants were between 18 and 30 years old, 26.8% between 31 and 40 years old, 21.6% between 41 and 50 years old, 21.0% between 51 and 60, and 4.4% were over 60 years old. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the sample.

A random sampling approach was not feasible for this study, as it could have included firms that had not undergone significant change, thereby limiting the validity of the findings. Instead, the purposive sampling strategy allowed for a targeted selection of organizations with relevant change experiences, ensuring that the study captured meaningful variation in business status and change dynamics. Additionally, snowball sampling facilitated access to firms that met the selection criteria, leveraging industry networks to identify key cases that would have been difficult to reach through other means (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This combination of purposive and snowball sampling was chosen because it provided a contextually rich dataset, aligning with best practices in organizational research on governance and change management (Yin, 2018).

Measures

The questionnaire used for data collection was structured in two sections. The first section gathered participants' socio-demographic information, including the type of business they belonged to. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate whether their business was owned and actively managed by family members, following the general definition given by Astrachan and Shanker (2003). Responses affirming this criterion were categorized as family businesses. To ensure robustness in classification, additional checks were performed, considering whether key managerial positions were held by family members and whether the business had a stated succession plan.

The second section aimed to measure the study variables, CT, PO, and CS, and consisted of three validated scales. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The reliability of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with all values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming good internal consistency.

Commitment to Change was measured using the Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) scale, which consists of 18 items distributed across three dimensions: AC, which measures emotional involvement, and affective perception of changes (e.g. '*I believe in the value of these changes,*' $\alpha = 0.75$); CC, which assesses adherence to instrumental changes (e.g.

'*I have no choice but to go along with these changes,*' α = 0.78); and NC, which gauges commitment dictated by normative and moral adherence (e.g. '*I feel a duty to engage in promoting the implementation of these changes,*' α = 0.72). This scale has been widely used in organizational change studies and has demonstrated consistent reliability across different contexts.

Satisfaction with Communication was assessed using an adapted version of the *Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ)* (Downs & Hazen, 1977), explicitly selecting 24 items from the validated scale used by Zwijze-Koning and de Jong (2007). This scale captures different aspects of communication within the workplace, including communication with colleagues, managers, and the organization. Examples of items include: '*Communication from the management team is clear and concise,*' '*I am satisfied with the information I receive about practical matters within this organization,*' and '*The amount of information exchanged between departments is about right.*' The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (α = 0.96), confirming its suitability for measuring employees' perceptions of communication effectiveness in organizational settings.

PO was measured using a 10-item scale adapted from Avey et al. (2009), focusing on four key dimensions: emotional attachment, sense of control, sense of responsibility, and personal investment in the organization. Example items include: '*I am confident I can make a positive difference in this organization,*' '*I would challenge anyone in my organization if I thought something was done wrong,*' and '*I feel this organization's success is my success.*' This scale has been widely used in studies examining employees' psychological attachment to their workplace and has shown good psychometric properties in previous research (α = 0.75).

All scales were tested for construct validity through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), ensuring each measurement model appropriately captured the intended theoretical constructs. The results confirmed that each scale maintained a satisfactory model fit, supporting their validity for this study.

Data Analysis

To assess the reliability of the proposed scales, both Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) and the composite reliability (CR) index were calculated. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 were considered acceptable, ensuring internal consistency, while the same threshold was applied for CR, following the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981). In addition, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the structure of the scales and determine which items were best suited for analysis. Model fit was assessed using RMSEA, CFI, and TLI indices, where RMSEA values ≤ 0.06 and CFI and TLI values ≥ 0.95 were considered indicators of a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The initial CFA model showed a reasonable fit (RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.950), but based on modification indices, two items with high cross-loadings were removed. The final CFA model demonstrated good fit indices, with RMSEA = 0.050, CFI = 0.963, and TLI = 0.961, all within the recommended thresholds.

Harman's single-factor test was conducted to control Common Method Bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results indicated that no single factor accounted for most variance, suggesting that CMB was not a significant issue in this study. Additionally, Variance

Inflation Factor (VIF) values were calculated to check for multicollinearity (PO, VIF = 1.41, Tolerance = 0708; CS, VIF = 1.41, Tolerance = 0.708). All values fell below the critical threshold of 5 (Kline, 2015), providing additional confirmation that CMB did not distort the results.

Correlation analyses were performed to explore the associations between the study variables. Additionally, ANOVA tests were conducted to examine statistically significant differences in study variables based on employee gender and business type (family vs. non-family firms).

A moderated mediation analysis model (MoMe) was employed to test the study hypotheses. Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (v.25). SPSS PROCESS Macro v.4.1 was used to construct the models that explore the relationships between CS and CT, CS and PO, and PO and CT, as well as the moderating role of business type (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017). The dimensions of CC (AC, CC, and NC) were set as dependent variables, with CS as the predictor and PO as the mediator. At the same time, business type was included as the moderator variable.

A moderated mediation model was chosen as the most appropriate analytical approach because it allows for the simultaneous examination of mediating and moderating effects within a single framework (Hayes, 2015). This approach is particularly suitable for this study as it explores how PO mediates the effect of CS on CT and whether this mediating effect differs based on business type (family vs. non-family firms). Traditional mediation or moderation analyses alone would not have been sufficient to capture these complex interactions, as they fail to account for the conditional nature of the mediation effect across different business contexts (Edwards & Lambert, 2007).

To assess the model's goodness-of-fit, the R^2 index was considered, evaluating the explanatory power of the proposed relationships. Regression coefficients were examined using a bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples, following Preacher and Hayes (2008) to assess the significance of the effects between variables. This nonparametric approach provides bias-corrected confidence intervals, ensuring a more robust estimation of direct and indirect effects.

To determine whether business type significantly influenced the relationship between study variables, the Moderated Mediation (MoMe) Index was computed (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2015). The MoMe Index measures the difference in the strength of an indirect effect based on a moderator variable. A statistically significant MoMe Index indicates that the strength of the mediated effect varies depending on the value of the moderator (Hayes, 2015).

Results

The reliability and validity tests confirmed the three-factor structure of CT and the single-factor structures of PO and CS. The CFA results indicated an adequate model fit ($\chi^2 = 2299.414$, df = 1264, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.050, CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.961), supporting the factorial structure of the proposed scales. Comparatively, a single-factor model demonstrated a significantly poorer fit ($\chi^2 = 8691$, df = 1274, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.108, CFI = 0.516, TLI = 0.496), reinforcing the distinctiveness of the constructs and mitigating concerns related to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 2. Descriptives, reliability indexes and correlations (Pearson).

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	*α*	*CR*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.AC	3.97	0.76	0.75	0.78	–				
2.CC	2.46	0.88	0.78	0.76	-.008	–			
3.NC	3.43	0.83	0.72	0.75	.49***	.22***	–		
4.PO	3.79	0.60	0.75	0.81	.28***	.02	.33***	–	
5.CS	3.86	0.75	0.96	0.98	.23***	-.007	.27***	.54***	–

Note: **** = p < .001; AC = Affective Commitment; CC = Continuance Commitment; NC = Normative Commitment; PO = Psychological Ownership; CS = Communication satisfaction*

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) indices, with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating strong reliability across all scales. Table 2 reports the reliability indices and means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Correlation analysis revealed moderate, positive, and significant associations between PO and both AC (r = .28, $p < .01$) and NC (r = .33, $p < .01$), suggesting that employees who experience a strong sense of ownership tend to develop a higher emotional and NC to organizational change. Similarly, CS was positively correlated with AC (r = .23, $p < .01$) and NC (r = .27, $p < .01$), indicating that higher satisfaction with communication enhances employees' emotional and moral engagement with change initiatives. Notably, the CC dimension exhibited a significant, albeit weaker, correlation only with NC (r = .22, $p < .05$), suggesting that employees who remain committed due to perceived obligation may feel constrained by external pressures. Additionally, a strong positive correlation was observed between PO and CS (r = .54, $p < .001$), reinforcing that employees who feel a sense of ownership over their organization tend to perceive communication processes as more transparent and engaging.

The results of the ANOVA models, presented in Table 3, indicate significant differences in AC based on both gender ($F(1,499) = 5.86$, $p < .05$) and business type ($F(1,499) = 27.56$, $p < .001$). Specifically, women report higher levels of AC than men, while employees in non-family businesses exhibit greater AC than those in family businesses. However, the effect sizes for both gender ($\eta^2 = .017$) and business type ($\eta^2 = .056$) suggest that these factors explain only a small portion of the variance in AC (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3. ANOVA results.

Factor	Variable	F	g.d.l 1	g.d.l 2	*p*	Mean difference
Business status	AC	27.561	1	499	.000	0.363*
	CC	0.990	1	499	.320	0.081*
	NC	3.699	1	499	.055	0.148*
	PO	1.929	1	499	.166	0.077*
	CS	0.939	1	499	.333	0.068*
Gender	AC	5.859	1	499	.016	−0.171**
	CC	0.007	1	499	.931	0.007**
	NC	2.773	1	499	.096	−0.128**
	PO	0.410	1	499	.522	−0.036**
	CS	0.003	1	499	.952	−0.004**

No significant differences emerged for CC or NC across gender or business type, nor were there significant variations in PO or CS. This suggests that while individual and organizational characteristics may influence affective responses to change, their impact on other dimensions of commitment remains limited.

Test of Hypotheses

The empirical model with AC as the dependent variable demonstrated sufficient goodness-of-fit ($R^2 = 0.14$, $p < .001$), indicating that CS and PO exert significant positive effects on AC, thereby supporting Hypothesis H1 and H2a. However, distinct patterns emerge when analyzing the effects separately for family and non-family businesses.

Within family businesses, the direct effect of CS on AC was not significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = .22$), whereas PO had a substantial positive effect on AC ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the model identified a significant indirect effect of CS on AC through PO ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$), suggesting that PO fully mediates the relationship between CS and AC in family businesses, supporting a total mediation effect.

Conversely, in non-family businesses, both CS ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .05$) and PO ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .001$) exerted significant direct effects on AC. The indirect effect of CS on AC through PO was also significant ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation in this context. These findings confirm that total mediation occurs in family businesses, whereas partial mediation occurs in non-family businesses, thus supporting Hypothesis H2b.

Despite these differences in mediation effects, the Moderated Mediation (MoMe) Index was not statistically significant ($b = -0.006$; 95% CI: − 0.15, 0.12), suggesting that the strength of the indirect effect between CS, PO, and AC does not differ significantly between family and non-family businesses. In other words, while the nature of the mediation varies, the overall magnitude of the indirect effect remains stable across business types.

Table 4. Model summary (AC dependent).

Factor levels	Path	Estimate	*SE*	*p*
Non-family	PO => AC	0.23	0.06	.000
	CS => AC	0.18	0.07	.014
	CS => PO => AC	0.11	0.03	.000
Family	PO => AC	0.28	0.06	.000
	CS => AC	0.07	0.06	.220
	CS => PO => AC	0.11	0.02	.000

Note: $R^2 = 0.14$, $p < .001$

Table 5. Model summary (NC dependent).

Factor levels	Path	Estimate	*SE*	*p*
Non-family	PO => NC	0.41	0.07	.000
	CS => NC	0.14	0.08	.071
	CS => PO => NC	0.20	0.04	.000
Family	PO => NC	0.31	0.07	.000
	CS => NC	0.14	0.06	.03
	CS => PO => NC	0.12	0.03	.000

Note: $R^2 = 0.13$, $p < .001$

Regarding CC, the empirical model failed to achieve a satisfactory model fit ($R^2 = 0.01$, $p = .417$), indicating that neither PO nor CS significantly influenced this dimension of commitment.

The model with NC as the dependent variable demonstrated adequate goodness-of-fit ($R^2 = 0.13$, $p < .001$), confirming that CS and PO exert significant effects on NC, further supporting Hypothesis H1 and H2a. However, the effects again varied based on business type. Within family businesses, both CS ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < .05$) and PO ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$) had significant direct effects on NC and an indirect effect of CS on NC through PO was also found ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < .001$), suggesting partial mediation.

Within non-family businesses, PO exerted a substantial direct effect on NC ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$), while CS had a non-significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = .071$). However, the indirect effect of CS on NC through PO was significant ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$), indicating that PO fully mediates the effect of CS on NC in non-family businesses. These findings support the existence of partial mediation in family businesses and total mediation in non-family businesses, further confirming Hypothesis H2b.

Once again, the MoMe Index was non-significant (b = −0.078; 95% CI: – 0.23, 0.06), indicating that the indirect effect of CS on NC through PO does not significantly differ between family and non-family businesses.

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the results of the moderated mediation models (with AC and NC as dependent variables, respectively).

Statistical path diagrams are depicted in Figures 2 and 3. Standardized effects coefficients are reported in bold for family-type businesses and in italics for non-family-type businesses. The coefficients of the moderating effects of the business type on each relationship are reported near the arrows stemming from the 'business type' box.

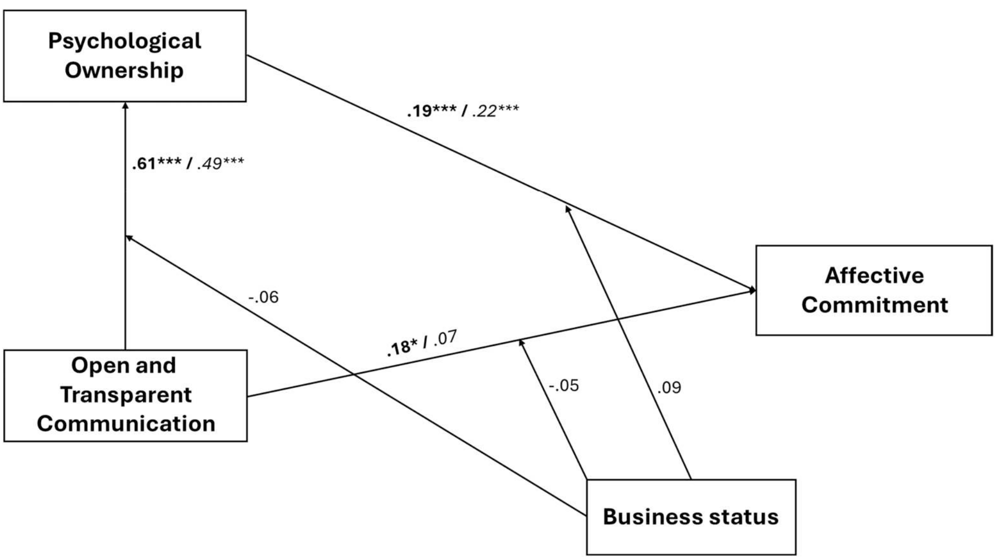

Figure 2. Statistical path diagram (AC dependent).
Note: Non-family firms (bold), family firms (italic). * = p < .05; *** = p < .000.

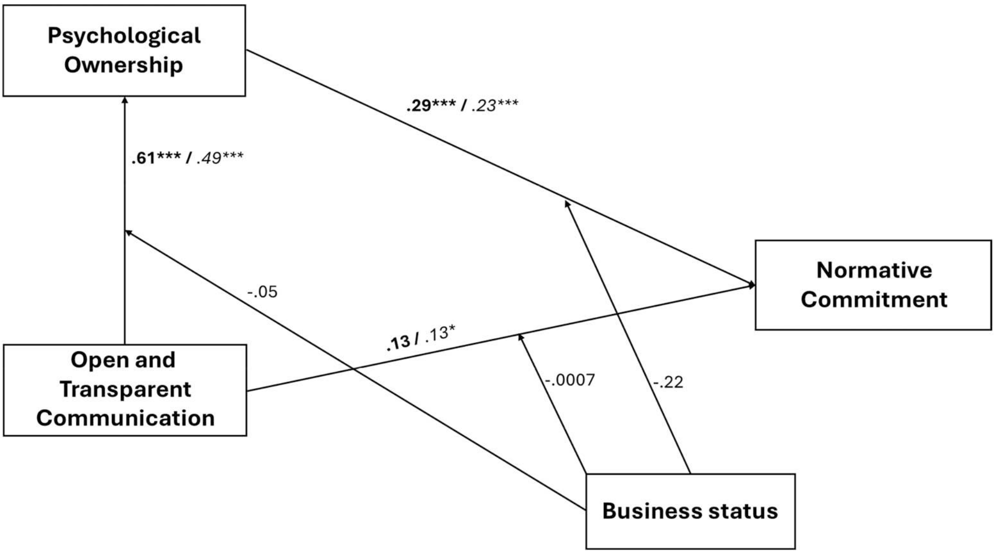

Figure 3. Statistical path diagram (NC dependent).
Note: Non-family firms (bold), family firms (italic). * = p < .05; *** = p < .000.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how **CS** and PO jointly influence employees' **CT** in family versus non-family businesses. The results confirm that PO positively affects CT – particularly its **AC** and **NC** dimensions – and that CS plays a critical role in cultivating this ownership mindset. However, these dynamics differ based on business type, underscoring the importance of organizational context in shaping change-related attitudes and behaviours.

Notably, we contribute to a more dynamic and context-sensitive interpretation of Stewardship Theory by showing that stewardship behaviours are not confined to family firms but can also arise in various organizational settings when organizations actively promote psychological ownership (PO) and change communication strategies (CS). These findings build on previous research linking PO to a range of positive organizational outcomes – including job satisfaction, organizational identification, perceived responsibility, commitment, and organizational justice (Avey et al., 2009; Dawkins et al., 2017; Jussila et al., 2015; Karahanna et al., 2015; Peck et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) – by specifically clarifying PO's role in shaping employees' CT. In particular, our results support **H1**, demonstrating a positive association between PO and CT, with nuanced variations depending on the governance context.

In family businesses, employees with higher levels of psychological ownership (PO) are likelier to exhibit affective commitment (AC), as deep emotional bonds and a shared identity lead them to view the firm's success as part of their own. Our findings support and extend Stewardship Theory by demonstrating that psychological mechanisms like PO activate the stewardship mindset, turning legacy and collective identity into a stronger emotional commitment to change (Henssen et al., 2014; Vallejo, 2009).

In contrast, PO is more closely associated with NC in non-family firms, indicating that employees are motivated more by duty and obligation than emotional attachment. These distinctions suggest that, although PO is a key driver of CT, its specific influence varies based on organizational governance and culture. Our findings contribute to Stewardship Theory by demonstrating that stewardship does not depend on familial bonds; organizations can actively foster it through structural enablers – such as communication and role clarity – that promote collective responsibility, even in professionally managed, non-family environments.

Moreover, the findings highlight that CS is essential in fostering AC and NC. Open dialogue, timely updates, and clear explanations regarding change initiatives help reduce uncertainty, build trust, and increase employees' willingness to engage in the change process (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; De Ridder, 2004; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). However, despite playing a critical role, change communication strategies (CS) alone do not guarantee a strong commitment to change (CT); they become most effective when organizations combine them with heightened psychological ownership (PO). This finding reflects the core principles of Stewardship Theory, which holds that transparent, participative communication enables organizations to foster shared ownership and intrinsic motivation – two key drivers of stewardship behaviour across all levels (Mustafa et al., 2023).

Mediation analyses revealed that PO fully mediates the effect of CS on AC in family businesses and on NC in non-family businesses, reinforcing the idea that governance context shapes distinct pathways to CT. Specifically, our results confirm **H2a**, demonstrating that CS positively influences AC and NC, thus extending earlier scholarly work (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; De Ridder, 2004; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Effective communication about upcoming changes promotes acceptance and trust, reducing anxiety and resistance.

Furthermore, **H2b** is supported, showing that CS enhances PO in family and non-family organizations and that PO fully mediates the relationship between CS and CT. PO acts as a full mediator between CS and AC in family businesses. CS does not directly increase AC but strengthens employees' ownership feelings, which drives emotional engagement with change. Conversely, complete mediation applies to NC in non-family businesses, suggesting that well-designed communication strategies foster a stronger sense of responsibility by enhancing PO.

These findings demonstrate the inherently contextual nature of CS and PO in shaping AC and NC. Emotional and identity-based ties in family firms call for communication strategies that leverage personal connections to promote AC. In non-family firms, securing NC depends more on structured, consistent messaging that appeals to professional duty and collective accountability. These insights highlight the complexity of managing organizational change across governance contexts. CS must align with the dominant motivational mechanisms to be effective: emotional attachment in family firms and normative obligation in non-family firms.

Ultimately, this study significantly extends Stewardship Theory by demonstrating that stewardship logic is not monolithic but plural and context-dependent. Family firms ground stewardship in affective identification and legacy, whereas non-family firms deliberately cultivate it through governance practices that promote normative alignment. These findings redefine stewardship not as a fixed attribute of ownership but as a flexible capability shaped by organizational design.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions. First, it advances Stewardship Theory by reframing stewardship as a collective, psychologically driven process rather than a fixed trait of top executives. We demonstrate that psychological ownership (PO), when activated through change communication strategies (CS), plays a crucial role in fostering employees' commitment to change (CT). CT is understood here as an attitudinal state aligned with organizational transformation.

Previous research has often treated stewardship as a behavioural outcome rooted in individual pro-organizational values, typically associated with CEOs or owner-managers (e.g. Davis et al., 1997; Henssen et al., 2014). Our findings challenge this assumption. We show that stewardship can emerge collectively, spreading across employees who develop a shared sense of PO – even without formal authority or ownership rights. In doing so, we respond to the call by Mustafa et al. (2023) to explore how psychological ownership contributes to variations in stewardship between family and non-family firms.

Importantly, we do not argue that PO directly produces stewardship behaviour. Instead, we find that PO enables the underlying attitudinal condition – a strong CT – essential for pro-organizational engagement. We identify PO as the key translational mechanism linking communication practices to internalizing change-related goals. Although this mechanism applies across governance contexts, it functions differently depending on the firm's status.

Based on our findings, we propose two distinct forms of stewardship: ***Heartfelt Stewardship***, typical of family firms, and ***Duty-Bound Stewardship***, more common in non-family businesses. These forms reflect alternative pathways through which PO fosters CT, shaped by emotional and normative foundations. Despite their differences, both forms represent a psychological readiness for behavioural engagement. Crucially, this readiness does not stem from a hierarchical position or formal role but from each individual's psychological investment in the organization's future. We define **Heartfelt Stewardship** as a stewardship orientation rooted in emotional identification and affective attachment to the organization. In family firms, employees – often members of the owning family – tend to view the organization not merely as a workplace but as a meaningful extension of themselves and their family legacy. In this context, they express PO through deep emotional investment, a sense of custodianship, and long-term identification with the firm's future. This emotional grounding strengthens their affective commitment (AC) to change, leading them to support transformation initiatives that they perceive as aligned with the organization's enduring values, historical path, and intergenerational continuity. In contrast, **Duty-Bound Stewardship** emerges in non-family firms, where governance structures emphasize formal roles, professional accountability, and institutional norms. In these contexts, employees develop PO through mechanisms such as participatory decision-making and transparent communication. Their stewardship orientation is anchored in a sense of professional duty and role-based responsibility. They act in the organization's interest because they recognize a normative obligation to do so – what benefits the organization also aligns with ethical expectations. Consequently, their CT tends to take the form of normative commitment (NC), a willingness to support change based on internalized standards, ethical norms, and collective purpose. Although these two forms differ in their motivational foundations, both represent attitudinal conditions that facilitate behavioural engagement with change. Crucially, neither form depends on formal authority or hierarchical position. Instead, both emerge from an individual's psychological investment in the organization's future, a process shaped by the interaction between communication strategies and governance structures.

By identifying and defining **Heartfelt** and **Duty-Bound Stewardship**, we expand Stewardship Theory beyond its traditional emphasis on executive-level behaviour. We reframe stewardship as a context-dependent, psychologically driven phenomenon that organizations can intentionally cultivate among employees at all levels, depending on whether the firm operates under affective or normative governance logic.

These insights carry significant implications for change management. In family firms, leaders should design change narratives emphasizing continuity, values, and legacy to activate Heartfelt Stewardship. In non-family firms, managers should clarify roles, ensure transparency, and promote shared accountability to foster Duty-Bound Stewardship. Both forms can serve as powerful psychological anchors that help mobilize employee support for organizational transformation.

Through this research, we broaden the theoretical reach of Stewardship Theory by aligning our findings with – and extending – the contributions of Sieger et al. (2011). While their work showed that agents can become psychological principals through PO, we shifted the emphasis from entrepreneurship and performance to the context of organizational change.

Additionally, we contribute to the literature on PO, CT, and CS by offering a nuanced view of their analysis of their interaction across different organizational contexts, We advance understanding in three areas: (1) the role of PO in fostering CT, (2) the mediating function of PO in the relationship between CS and CT, and (3) the moderating influence of business type (family vs. non-family firms) on these relationships.

First, we extend research on PO (Avey et al., 2009; Dawkins et al., 2017; Jussila et al., 2015) by show that PO serves as a crucial antecedent of CT, particularly its affective (AC) and normative (NC) dimensions. Although earlier studies have linked PO to positive work-related outcomes – such as job satisfaction, organizational identification, and commitment (Peck et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) – our research deepens this knowledge by focusing specifically on PO's role in shaping employees' CT, a relatively underexplored area. Our findings reveal that employees who perceive a strong sense of PO are more likely to develop AC and NC toward change,

Second, we clarify how CS, PO, and CT interact. While CS is essential, it alone is insufficient to generate strong CT. PO is a critical mediator: in family firms, PO mediates between CS and AC; in non family business, between CS and NC. Effective communication strategies must therefore activate psychological ownership to build commitment.

Third, we contribute to the literature on family business governance by showing how PO and CS influence CT differently across governance types. Whereas earlier studies have explored the impact of governance structures on organizational behaviour (Chrisman et al., 2011; Sieger et al., 2011; Vallejo, 2009), we show that family governance moderates the pathways through which CT develops. In family firms, we observe that PO is more strongly associated with AC, as employees often form deep emotional attachments to the organization and see its success as part of their own identity (Zellweger et al., 2012). In contrast, PO aligns more closely with NC in non-family firms, suggesting that employees support change primarily out of a sense of duty rather than an emotional connection. These insights underscore the need to consider governance context when designing effective change management strategies.

Our findings underscore the need for change-management strategies tailored to a firm's governance structure. While communication is critical, it alone cannot ensure a successful transformation. Instead, we identify psychological ownership (PO) as a decisive mediator between communication strategies (CS) and commitment to change (CT). When employees develop a genuine sense of ownership over the change process, they show greater motivation to accept and sustain transformation – regardless of whether the organization is family-owned or not.

In family firms, employees often build strong affective commitment (AC) grounded in emotional ties and deep identification with the firm's history and values. They cultivate PO through shared traditions, participatory decision-making, and intergenerational collaboration. To sustain this connection, leaders should frame organizational change as an organic evolution that honours and extends the firm's legacy rather than disrupting it. To strengthen AC and PO, managers can tell stories that link family values to future initiatives, create cross-generational teams to co-develop strategic goals, and assign responsibilities that grant employees meaningful autonomy. Transparent and consistent communication – aligned with family culture – further reduces uncertainty and reinforces trust. By emphasizing the continuity of core values while encouraging innovation, leaders in family firms can create a context where employees feel emotionally invested in every change phase.

In non-family firms, employees' sense of ownership tends to rely less on emotional identification and more on normative commitment (NC), shaped by professional responsibility and role expectations. In these settings, managers should clearly define roles, set structured objectives, and communicate performance expectations to foster PO. They can reinforce this by offering timely, data-driven updates on proposed changes and linking rewards to measurable results. Such clarity reduces ambiguity, increases accountability, and strengthens employees' perception of having a personal stake in the firm's success. Since non-family firms often operate within more hierarchical and standardized systems, leaders should also implement participatory practices – such as cross-functional teams, structured feedback loops, and open forums – to bridge the gap between decision-makers and operational staff. By encouraging decision-making autonomy and promoting a culture of continuous improvement, non-family firms can boost PO, lower resistance, and deepen engagement with change initiatives.

One of our central insights is that effective communication – whether it highlights legacy and values in family firms or emphasizes rationality and role clarity in non-family contexts – requires reinforcement through strategies that actively cultivate employees' psychological ownership (PO). While transparent, timely, and participatory communication helps reduce uncertainty and improve understanding, it alone cannot fully mobilize employee commitment. Without simultaneously fostering PO, communication loses much of its power to generate genuine engagement. In this dynamic, communication lays the groundwork for alignment, but PO fuels the intrinsic motivation that drives employees to embrace and champion organizational transformation.

To strengthen PO – and, in turn, boost commitment to change (CT) – organizations can apply job design principles that increase employees' autonomy, task significance, and feedback opportunities, as outlined in Hackman and Oldham's (1976) Job Characteristics Model. For example, when managers delegate tasks with greater freedom and visibility, they allow employees to feel more in control of their work, encouraging stronger personal identification with routine and transformational activities. In highly bureaucratic environments, leaders should avoid overly rigid structures that restrict autonomy or limit employees' capacity to take initiative, as these conditions may suppress ownership.

Based on these findings, we recommend that advisors and change agents tailor their interventions to the firm's governance model. Family businesses should emphasize emotional connections to organizational heritage and design participatory, cross-generational initiatives. In non-family firms, they should promote professional growth, clarify roles, and ensure structured accountability. By creating environments that support ambidexterity – where employees are free to experiment and innovate while remaining aligned with strategic goals – organizations can help individuals internalize change as their own. When employees perceive that they have the autonomy, responsibility, and knowledge to shape the future of their workplace, they are far more likely to stay motivated and engaged throughout the change process, even in the face of uncertainty or disruption.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study has theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations should be noted. A key limitation of this study is its single-country focus on Italy, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Italy has a high prevalence of family businesses, and cultural factors such as high uncertainty avoidance may influence attitudes toward change differently than in other regions. Future research should replicate this study in countries with different corporate governance traditions (e.g. Anglo-Saxon vs. Asian markets) to assess the cross-cultural applicability of our model. Another limitation can be associated with the selection of the sample of firms. A further approach to expanding the sample would be to differentiate between large and small businesses and verify if the results hold. In an alternative approach, the research might be replicated by incorporating a cultural variable with a differentiation between physical locations and assessing this factor's impact on the outcomes. It may be intriguing to examine potential distinctions between the two categories of firms: by focusing exclusively on family firms, one could investigate the influence of the firm's age and generational composition on the outcomes achieved, whereas, in non-family firms, one could scrutinize the potential impact of leadership style on the obtained results. This line of inquiry is especially promising for advancing Stewardship Theory: in family firms, multi-generational dynamics may reinforce or hinder stewardship identity, while in non-family firms, transformational or participative leadership may serve as key enablers of contextualized stewardship. Unpacking these mechanisms could help evolve the theory toward a more flexible and operational framework applicable across a range of leadership and business status.

Conclusion

This study empirically tested the relationship between PO, CS and CT in family and non-family businesses. This study emphasizes the mutually beneficial link between CS and PO, highlighting the fact that workers who cultivate a feeling of ownership over both the tangible and intangible components of their job greatly increase the efficacy of open and honest communication about change. This kind of sense of ownership is not only advantageous but also necessary to fully understand how change in communication affects commitment to change. It suggests that when employees have a strong sense of ownership over their work, clarity and transparency in change-related communication produce better results. These findings provide new insight into the effect of these variables on the change processes and how to promote employees' AC and NC. More broadly, these results offer a novel empirical contribution to the advancement of Stewardship Theory by identifying PO as the enabling mechanism through which stewardship values – such as trust, collective interest, and long-term orientation – translate into tangible employee responses to change. This study further suggests that stewardship is not only a function of leadership or governance status, but an emergent outcome of interactional processes between CS and PO. As such, this study expands Stewardship Theory by reframing it as a relational and psychologically grounded model of organizational behaviour during transformation.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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