

CAN FAMILY FIRMS REALLY BE AMBIDEXTROUS?

Executive summary and practitioner insights by Angèle Marinelli, PhD Fellow, and Cécile de Lisle, Executive Director, Dieter Schwarz Foundation Family Business Center, based on Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, S., Mignon, S., & Vezin, P. (2010). L'ambidextrie des entreprises familiales : comment concilier orientation entrepreneuriale et stratégie de pérennité? *Revue Internationale PME*, 23(2), 65–94.

This summary draws on the core findings of Ben Mahmoud-Jouini et al. (2010), with interpretation and application developed independently by Angèle Marinelli and Cécile de Lisle for a family business audience



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

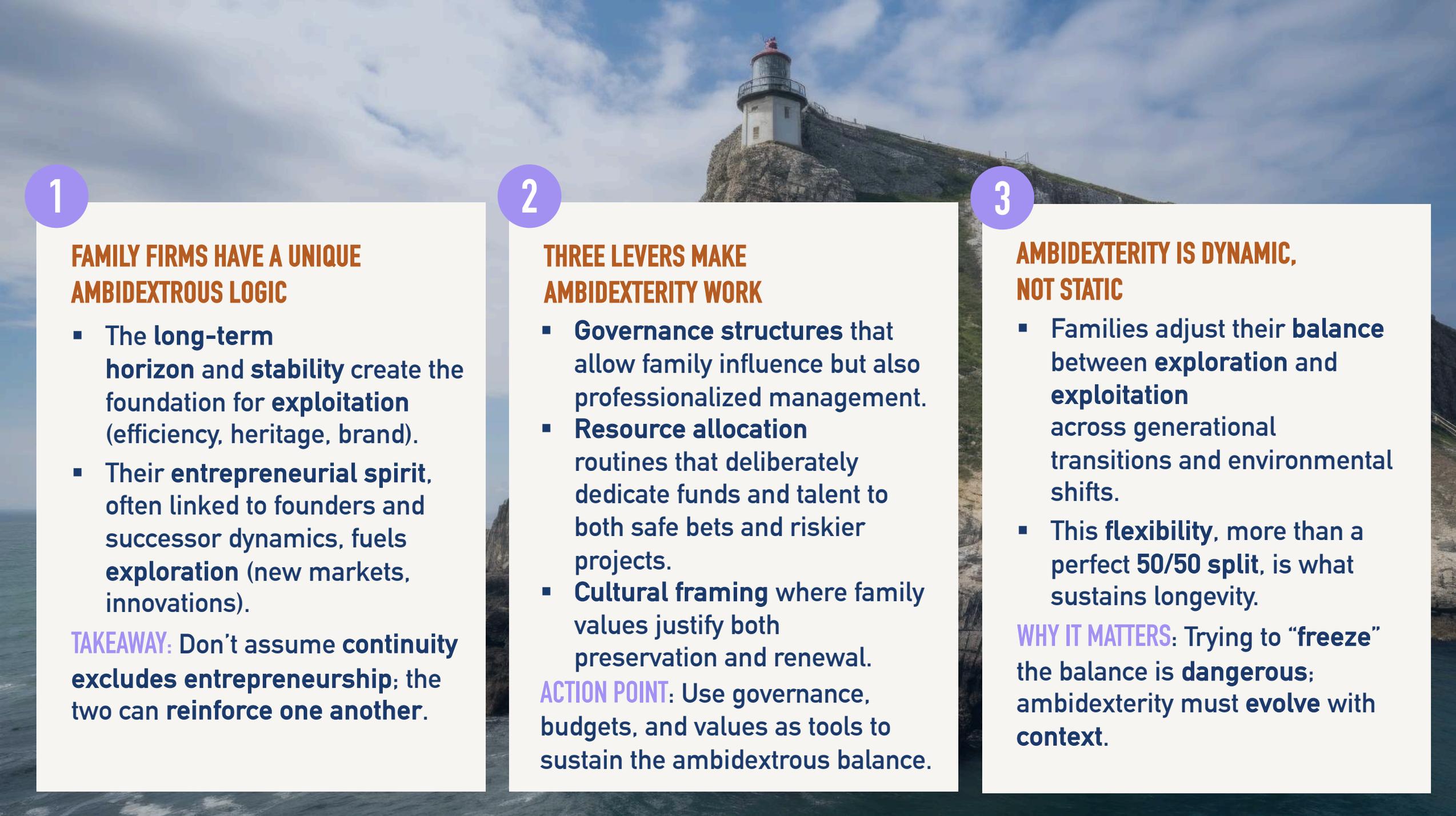
Family firms are often portrayed as **too conservative** to innovate or **too risk-averse** to last. This article shows they can, in fact, be **ambidextrous**: able to explore **new opportunities** while exploiting **existing strengths**.

Based on a qualitative study of 12 French family SMEs, the authors reveal that **family firms develop a distinctive form of ambidexterity**, rooted in long-term continuity and socioemotional wealth, but enriched by **entrepreneurial orientation**. The paradox is real: the same values that drive prudence also enable boldness, when carefully managed.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS MEANS FOR YOUR FIRM?

Continue reading to learn our **three key insights** and **questions to ask** within your family firm!





1

FAMILY FIRMS HAVE A UNIQUE AMBIDEXTROUS LOGIC

- The **long-term horizon** and **stability** create the foundation for **exploitation** (efficiency, heritage, brand).
- Their **entrepreneurial spirit**, often linked to founders and successor dynamics, fuels **exploration** (new markets, innovations).

TAKEAWAY: Don't assume **continuity** excludes **entrepreneurship**; the two can **reinforce one another**.

2

THREE LEVERS MAKE AMBIDEXTERITY WORK

- **Governance structures** that allow family influence but also professionalized management.
- **Resource allocation** routines that deliberately dedicate funds and talent to both safe bets and riskier projects.
- **Cultural framing** where family values justify both preservation and renewal.

ACTION POINT: Use governance, budgets, and values as tools to sustain the ambidextrous balance.

3

AMBIDEXTERITY IS DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC

- Families adjust their **balance** between **exploration** and **exploitation** across generational transitions and environmental shifts.
- This **flexibility**, more than a perfect **50/50 split**, is what sustains longevity.

WHY IT MATTERS: Trying to “freeze” the balance is **dangerous**; ambidexterity must evolve with **context**.



QUESTIONS TO ASK WITHIN YOUR FAMILY FIRM



How do our governance and decision-making processes support both continuity and entrepreneurial risk-taking?



Do we explicitly allocate resources to exploration, or does exploitation quietly dominate?



Are family values serving as a bridge between past and future or as a brake on change?



How does our balance shift during succession, crises, or new growth phases?





BOTTOM LINE



Family firms are not doomed to choose between tradition and entrepreneurship. When managed as a dynamic system, they can be **ambidextrous organizations: exploiting heritage while exploring the future.**

The challenge is to **consciously design governance, resource flows, and cultural narratives** so that **continuity and renewal reinforce rather than cancel each other to foster innovation.**