

The Dynamics of Internal Communication Co-Orientation in Family Business Startups: A Case Study of Intergenerational Communication at the Padel Side

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the internal communication co-orientation dynamics at a family business startup, The Padel Side, amidst the generational gap between Millennial management and Gen Z staff. Using an explanatory qualitative case study method (Yin, 2018) and Organizational Co-orientation Theory (Taylor, 1993), the research identifies four fundamental distortions: (1) a false consensus effect at the management level that creates a decision-making "black box," failing to translate into clear operational instructions; (2) failure in objectifying the meaning of "proactivity," where leaders view it as a moral/loyalty standard, while staff perceive it as a systemic risk leading to "freezing"; (3) digital text pathology through WhatsApp that triggers semantic ambiguity and hermeneutic anxiety among staff due to the loss of non-verbal cues; and (4) kinship stratification creating power asymmetry between family staff (symmetrical relationship) and non-family staff (complementary relationship/self-censorship). The study concludes that the codification of written SOPs and the implementation of hybrid communication protocols are crucial to mitigate message distortion and agency crisis within the organization.

KEYWORDS



Internal Communication; Family Business; Generation Z; Co-orientation Theory; False Consensus Effect.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the sports industry landscape in Indonesia has undergone a fundamental structural transformation. Sports are no longer seen solely as physical activities for health or conventional achievement competitions, but have shifted to an urban lifestyle commodity with high economic value (Ratten, 2019). This paradigm shift is creating a new business ecosystem that demands management professionalism, where sports service providers not only sell physical facilities, but also offer inclusive community experiences and values (Funk, 2017). The modern sports industry now operates at the intersection between the entertainment, health, and social interaction sectors, which collectively shape the experience economy.

The realization of delivering experience value to customers is impossible to achieve without solid coordination at the internal level. Therefore, internal communication plays a very vital role in the sustainability of the organization. More than just the exchange of technical information, internal communication is the main foundation for the formation and development of an organizational culture (Agustini, Nur Annisa Purnaningsih, 2018). In the perspective of constructivism, every interaction that occurs within a team is a continuous effort to build a mutually agreed upon social reality (Azwar, 2022). As affirmed by (Kalla, 2005) Integrated internal communication is an absolute requirement for multidisciplinary organizations to achieve operational efficiency. In the context of dynamic modern organizations, the effectiveness of communication is a key determinant for creating a harmonious and productive

work environment (Fitriyah, Luluk Atul Manasikana, Arina Hakim, 2024; Rahmanda, Ersan Feranza, Flarines Yena Sari, Nofalia Juliana Putri, Sekar Tijani Ferdiana, 2025)

The surge in popularity of padel is one of the most obvious manifestations of this global lifestyle trend. Reports Playtomic Global Padel Report 2025 recorded significant infrastructure growth with the establishment of more than 3,200 new clubs in 90 countries in just one year (Playtomic, 2025). Data from the International Padel Federation as of May 2024 puts Indonesia in first position in Southeast Asia in the number of registered courts (Safitri, 2025) indicates that this market is entering a hypercompetitive phase. This massive growth carries heavy managerial consequences; Padel service providers must be able to move nimbly in the midst of increasing market expectations.

This dynamic market momentum encourages The Padel Side's presence as a start-up business entity that will begin full operations in September 2024. As a new organization, The Padel Side was faced with the inherent challenges of startups in the form of market uncertainty, limited resources, and the demands of extreme operational flexibility (Safira, 2024) Mahendra and Putra (2025) mentioning that the pioneering phase is often colored by the chaotic flow of information that demands high adaptability from each team member. This is in line with the findings of Chi et al. (2021) which emphasizes that the effectiveness of internal communication is a critical variable in the service industry that demands a quick response to customer needs.

The managerial challenges at The Padel Side are made more complicated because the core structure of this organization is managed by a team that has kinship relationships. Family businesses have the unique characteristic of the intersection between two often contradictory systems: the family system based on emotion and loyalty, and the business system that demands rationality and accountability (Feudjo, 2021). An ethical organizational culture and open flow of information are key prerequisites for building employee advocacy (Jiang et al., 2023; Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022). However, this transparency is often difficult to achieve in a family business because of the complex process of negotiating meaning among the members of the organization, where the boundaries between professional instruction and personal bonds often overlap (Darwis & Azwar, 2024).

This condition is exacerbated by the organization's dependence on digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp as the main coordination medium. Although this medium offers speed, it also carries a high risk of ambiguity due to the loss of non-verbal cues in the exchange of messages. For leaders, the use of short messages is seen as a form of efficiency in the midst of the busyness of managing startups. However, for staff, unstructured digital instruction often fuels doubts in action. This inequality in interpreting digital texts creates semantic barriers that hinder the smooth running of daily operations, especially when leaders are unable to provide verbal explanations directly.

This complexity is exacerbated by the sharp demographic diversity between owners and staff. Millennials who occupy management positions tend to value processes, stable work experience, and a clear hierarchical structure. In contrast, Generation Z, who dominate operational staff, prioritize speed and fluid communication structure (Chillakuri, 2020). Stuttgart (2025) highlighting that these differences between generations have a direct impact on communication efficiency, which often creates interpretive barriers where strategic instructions are not executed with precision due to differences in the construction of meaning over the message.

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This friction creates the so-called Tkalc Verčič and Verčič (2025) as a paradox of internal communication. At The Padel Side, this manifests itself in Millennial management's tendency to stay in control of important decisions, while Gen Z staff feel the need for more detailed instruction clarity to avoid mistakes. The reliance on instant messaging apps as the primary coordination tool is often a double-edged sword that triggers anxiety, interpretation, meaning, and operational confusion in the field.

The urgency of effective internal communication is crucial to prevent organizational disintegration in the early stages of growth. Tkalc Verčič (2021) and Sukatno et al. (2018) Proving that internal communication satisfaction is a strong predictor of employee engagement. Given that 70% of family businesses fail during transition to the second generation primarily due to communication breakdowns (Feudjo, 2021), investigating these dynamics in the critical startup phase becomes paramount.

To analyze these dynamics, this study adopts Organizational Co-orientation Theory from James R. Taylor. This constructivist approach was selected to explore shared meaning formation and identify communication distortions arising from perception differences between team members. This study specifically employs Newcomb's A-B-X system model (1953) to dissect how management (A) and staff (B) orient themselves toward work objects (X). Through this lens, organizations are viewed as realities constructed through constant meaning negotiation, making organizational synergy highly dependent on communicator orientation alignment (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004).

This research aims to: (1) identify and analyze communication distortions occurring between Millennial management and Generation Z staff at The Padel Side; (2) examine how co-orientation patterns shape internal communication effectiveness in family business startup contexts; and (3) provide evidence-based recommendations for improving internal communication in similar organizational settings. The findings contribute both theoretically to co-orientation theory application in contemporary organizational contexts and practically by offering actionable insights for family business startups navigating generational communication challenges.

METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm. The use of this paradigm was based on the belief that the reality of the organization at *The Padel Side* was not static or objective, but a social construction formed continuously through the process of interaction and negotiation of meaning between its members (Azwar, 2022). The research strategy was a single descriptive-qualitative case study that focused on understanding how the meanings of "initiative" and "digital coordination" were constructed differently by management and staff (Yin, 2018).

The selection of this case study design was particularly relevant to explore answers to the questions of "how" co-orientation patterns were formed and "why" interpretive barriers occurred in the context of family-run sports startups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the research analysis unit lay in the dynamics of communication interactions between top management (Millennial generation) and operational staff (Generation Z) regarding their daily work objects.

Efforts to ensure data credibility were carried out through technical triangulation. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the construction of each individual's subjective meaning. Second, observations were made of the patterns of digital interaction in operational WhatsApp groups to examine how text was used to convey instructions. Third, a documentation study was conducted on internal rules to compare oral reality with the company's formal texts.

Five key informants were selected as research subjects using purposive sampling techniques. The basis for selecting informants included active involvement in daily operations, representation of generational gaps, and variations in kinship relationship status to gain rich perspectives from family and non-family elements. The details of the informants' profiles are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Initials Name	Departments	Generation	Relationship Status
R	President Director	Milenial (Gen Y)	Family (Owner)
A	Director of Operations	Milenial (Gen Y)	Family (Owner)
L	Financial Manager	Generation Z	Family (Owner)
S	Operational Staff	Generation Z	Family
D	Operational Staff	Generation Z	Non-Family

Source: Primary Data Processed (2025)

The data analysis process used pattern matching techniques. In constructivist logic, this technique compared the patterns of interpretation of meaning found in the field with the theoretical propositions of Organizational Co-orientation Theory (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). The analysis focused on the level of congruency and accuracy of perception between Management (A) and Staff (B) toward the Work Object (X). The alignment or deviation of meaning found between the two groups was then further analyzed to understand the construction of organizational reality in The Padel Side as a whole.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study dissects the communication structure in The Padel Side using the analysis of Organizational Co-orientation Theory (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). In contrast to the classical view that sees the organization as a static "container," Taylor views the organization as a process of negotiation of continuous meaning (*ongoing negotiation of meaning*) between its agents (Taylor, James R.; Van Every, 2000). Based on the analysis *pattern matching* (Yin, 2018), found four fundamental distortions in the co-orientation system at The Padel Side that can affect the effectiveness of internal and operational communication in this organization. These findings are summarized in the following Table 2:

Table 2. Deconstruction Matrix of the Meaning of Co-orientation in The Padel Side

Dimensions of Analysis	The Construction of the Meaning of Management (Millennial Dominance)	Construction Meaning Staff (Gen Z)	Organizational Impact
Definition of "Work"	<i>Mission-based</i>	<i>Task-based</i> (Complete tasks according to specific instruction lists)	Expectation friction; Leaders feel rigid/passive staff, Staff feel insecure.
WhatsApp Functions	Quick instruction efficiency tool	Sources of anxiety, punctuation ambiguity, & emotional distress	<i>Bottleneck</i> of decisions; Delays in field execution due to repeated confirmations.
Conflict Mechanism	Democratic voting (Symmetrical)	Diam (<i>Silence</i>) / <i>Freezing</i> (Complements)	False Consensus Effect (Management feels understood, even though the staff is confused).
Power Structure	Egalitarian / Open ("We are all friends")	Feudal/Closed ("They're the boss's family")	Inhibition of <i>bottom-up information</i> flow (especially from non-family staff).

Source: Researcher-Processed Data (2025)

Elite Co-Orientation and the "Black Box" Phenomenon of Decisions

At the top management level (System A-B), a perfectly symmetrical co-orientation pattern was found. The interaction between the President Director (R), the Operational Director (A), and the Manager (L) has a very mature conflict resolution mechanism. Informant R reveals the mechanics of his kitchen:

"The three of us always give the most votes... if the vote with the most votes is A, then A, the B is lost. We actually already know each other's jobs, the basis is trust."
(Interview, R)

The involvement of L (Gen Z) in the management ranks remains to make the pattern of interaction at the owner level follow a solid egalitarian style. The success of the "Conversation" (*Conversation*) at the elite level this is actually a paradox. The process of negotiating the meaning that takes place in the "upper room" is closed to operational staff (black box). Staff only receive the output of the decision without understanding the context of the debate (discourse) behind it. This phenomenon triggered the emergence of a pseudo-consensus (False Consensus Effect) described by Ross et al. (1977) where management projects their internal understanding to the rest of the organization assuming that the staff automatically understands.

L actively double-confirmed based on findings in the field. He is often the one who provides additional context or explains the intent of the instruction when R or A gives a quick command in a WhatsApp group to minimize interpretation failures. L seeks to establish congruency before a task (Object X) is executed by operational staff.

Objectification Failure: The Clash of the Meaning of "Proactivity" (Object X)

According to the theory of co-orientation, the essence of effective communication is the common attitude towards object X, which in this context is the "Work Initiative". However, field analysis found a failure in the definition of this object between management and staff.

- Construction of Leadership Meaning (A): A (Operational Director) constructs "Initiative" as a form of loyalty. He uses the metaphor of "mutual *backup*" as a standard of work ethics in startups.
"I want each other to back each other, even though it's not his job. Gen Z may be more on gadgets... vulnerable in time management." (Interview, Ali)
- Construction of Staff Meaning (B): For Gen Z operational staff, "Initiative without Instruction" is interpreted as a Danger Zone. Field observations confirm that the passive staff is a defense mechanism. They "freeze" not because they don't want to work, but because they are afraid of breaking invisible boundaries. This failure of management to understand the information needs of staff reflects what Welch and Jackson called (2007) as a weakness in the internal stakeholder approach.

In Taylor's perspective (1993) this is the crisis of the Agency (*Agency*). Staff feel they do not have the authority to translate the field situation into action in the absence of a "Text" (SOP) that validates the action. Leaders wait for action (initiative), Staff wait for text (instructions). It is this vacancy that causes operational paralysis.

Pathology of Text Communication: Semiotics of Fear on WhatsApp

Taylor et al. (1996) emphasizing that the organization becomes stable when conversations are crystallized into text. On The Padel Side, the authoritative "Text" is absent, replaced by fragile WhatsApp chats. Informant D (Staff) gave a crucial confession about the hermeneutic anxiety (interpretation of meaning) that he experienced:

"I'm confused about which punctuation marks, which commas, which periods... Sometimes miskom occurs. We need a quick answer because we are chased by customers, but the response of the leadership sometimes takes a long time." (Interview, D)

These findings show the existence of Semiotics of Power and ambiguity in text media:

1. **Digital Instruction Ambiguity:** The problem is not that the leader does not exist, but that when instructions are given via WhatsApp, there is a loss of non-verbal cues. Punctuation ambiguity is decoded by staff as "anger" or "displeasure". Gen Z staff spend cognitive energy guessing *the* mood of their bosses instead of focusing on operational solutions.
2. **WhatsApp as *Lean Media*:** Text media proved to be too "thin" (*lean*) to handle complex operational instructions. When the leader is physically present, the staff can immediately verify the intent of the instruction through tone of voice and expression. However, when leaders are busy and can only reply via chat, the instructions become fragile and trigger double *confirms* that hinder efficiency.

In the context of digital communication, L plays a crucial role in reducing the ambiguity experienced by Gen Z staff. When the leader gives instructions that are sometimes unclear or

without punctuation, L provides clarification directly to the staff using a language style that is easier for Gen Z to understand, so that the instructions are clearer and do not cause confusion.

The presence of L as a bridge proves that despite the obstacles in the communication process, The Padel Side did not experience a major crisis. L actively mediates meaning between leaders and staff, ensuring that the instructions given by leaders do not stop as ambiguous messages. It helps to process the message to make it easier for Gen Z staff to understand and accept, considering a way of thinking and a work approach that is more suitable for them.

Stratifikasi Kekerabatan: Asimetri Kuasa

The family business structure creates two contrasting classes of organizational citizenship:

- Class I - Family Staff (Representation: S): Have a symmetrical relationship. As a fellow family member and fellow Gen Z (with an L), S has a "back lane" to verify the meaning of instructions. Observations show that S is more daring to do *Speak Up* and debating instructions that are considered inappropriate, because the social capital is high. This proves Mazzei's thesis (2010) that active communication behavior only arises if supported by a secure environment.
- Class II - Non-Family Staff (Representation: D): Trapped in an Absolute Complementary relationship. Culture *A Thousand Years of Silence* (reluctant) to make D and other non-family staff do *Self-Censorship*. Problems in the field are often not reported honestly for fear of being perceived as offending the owner's family. This condition creates *blind spot* strategic for management, where they only hear "good news" or filtered aspirations from family members. This phenomenon inhibits the formation of *employer brand* strong from the inside (Santos et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in Organizational Co-orientation Theory, identifies four key communicative distortions undermining internal coordination at The Padel Side: a false consensus effect among leadership that masks unclear decisions for operational staff, creating job uncertainty; failure to objectify "proactivity," viewed by leaders as a moral standard but by Gen Z staff as a risk that paralyzes agency; WhatsApp-driven digital pathology, where text-only communication lacks non-verbal cues, fostering misinterpretation and anxiety; and kinship stratification in family business dynamics, which privileges family staff with symmetrical information access while imposing self-censorship on non-family members, generating strategic blind spots. For future research, longitudinal studies could track the long-term impact of hybrid communication protocols (e.g., combining digital SOPs with face-to-face sessions) on reducing these distortions across diverse family business sectors in Indonesia.

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