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**Beyond the Founder: Preserving and
Redefining Organizational Identity in
IED's Post-Founder Transformation**

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Abstract

Cosa accade quando un'organizzazione perde non soltanto il proprio fondatore, ma anche la persona nella quale si erano storicamente concentrate autorità, relazioni, conoscenze e significati organizzativi? La presente tesi analizza come un'organizzazione incentrata sul fondatore possa preservare e ridefinire la propria identità organizzativa mentre sviluppa maggiore autonomia oltre la sua presenza personale. Attraverso uno studio qualitativo basato sul caso dell'Istituto Europeo di Design (IED), la ricerca esamina la trasformazione avviata dopo la scomparsa di Francesco Morelli nel 2017, in un contesto caratterizzato dal trasferimento della proprietà alla Fondazione Francesco Morelli e dalla progressiva differenziazione delle responsabilità di governance, manageriali e accademiche.

L'analisi si basa su sei interviste semi-strutturate con informatori chiave, integrate da fonti documentali ed è stata condotta attraverso la Metodologia Gioia, secondo una logica analitica progressivamente induttivo-abduttiva. I risultati mostrano che la transizione post-fondatore non può essere ricondotta alla semplice sostituzione di un leader. Essa emerge invece come una trasformazione multidimensionale sostenuta da quattro processi interdipendenti: la redistribuzione dell'autorità organizzativa, lo sviluppo di capacità organizzative, l'istituzionalizzazione dell'eredità del fondatore e la ricostruzione dell'identificazione organizzativa. Nel loro insieme, questi processi mostrano come funzioni e significati precedentemente sostenuti in misura rilevante dalla presenza personale del fondatore siano stati progressivamente riallocati e incorporati in ruoli differenziati, organi di governance, pratiche, sistemi, relazioni e processi di identificazione con l'organizzazione.

Il modello emergente indica quindi che lo sviluppo dell'autonomia organizzativa non richiede una separazione dalla storia e dall'influenza del

fondatore. Al contrario, può essere sostenuto dalla riduzione della dipendenza dalla sua presenza personale, accompagnata dalla conservazione e reinterpretazione selettiva degli elementi del progetto originario considerati centrali per l'identità dell'organizzazione. Il caso IED mostra così come la continuità oltre il fondatore possa essere perseguita non riproducendo la centralità del fondatore, ma trasformando i meccanismi organizzativi attraverso cui autorità, capacità, legacy e senso di appartenenza vengono sostenute nel tempo.

Abstract

What happens when an organization loses not only its founder, but also the individual in whom authority, relationships, knowledge, and organizational meanings had historically converged? This thesis examines how a founder-centered organization can preserve and redefine its organizational identity while developing greater autonomy beyond the founder's personal presence. Drawing on a qualitative single-case study of Istituto Europeo di Design (IED), the research investigates the organizational transformation that followed the passing of Francesco Morelli in 2017, within a context characterized by the transfer of ownership to the Francesco Morelli Foundation and the progressive differentiation of governance, managerial, and academic responsibilities.

The analysis draws primarily on six semi-structured interviews with key informants, complemented by documentary sources, and was conducted using the Gioia Methodology through a progressively inductive-abductive analytical logic. The findings show that the post-founder transition cannot be understood as the mere replacement of one leader by another. Instead, it emerged as a multidimensional organizational transformation sustained by four interdependent processes: the redistribution of organizational authority, the development of organizational capabilities, the institutionalization of the founder's legacy and the reconstruction of organizational identification. Together, these processes show how functions and meanings that had previously depended substantially on the founder's personal presence were progressively reallocated and embedded in differentiated roles, governance bodies, organizational practices, systems, relationships, and forms of belonging.

The emergent model therefore suggests that developing organizational autonomy does not require detachment from the founder's history and influence. Rather, autonomy can be achieved by reducing dependence on

the founder's personal presence while selectively preserving and reinterpreting elements of the original organizational project regarded as central to organizational identity. The IED case thus shows how continuity beyond the founder can be sustained not by reproducing the founder's role, but by transforming the organizational mechanisms through which authority, capabilities, legacy, and belonging are sustained over time.

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1. Introduction

What happens when a founder has become so deeply embedded in an organization that his departure removes not only a leader, but also a central source of authority, interpretation, relationships, values, and organizational identity? In founder-centered organizations, the founder may represent considerably more than the individual who established the organization or occupies its highest executive position. Over time, strategic direction, decision-making authority, cultural meanings, organizational relationships, and members' understanding of what the organization stands for may become closely associated with his personal presence. Founder exit may therefore create a distinct organizational problem from ordinary managerial succession: the organization must continue operating after losing an individual who had previously connected several dimensions of organizational life at once (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Schein, 2010).

This problem is important because the influence of founders does not necessarily disappear when they leave. Research on organizational culture and imprinting shows that assumptions, practices, and meanings shaped during an organization's development may persist well beyond the circumstances and individuals that originally produced them (Schein, 2010; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). At the same time, organizational continuity cannot depend indefinitely on the personal authority, knowledge, relationships, or interpretive capacity of an individual who is no longer present. Post-founder transformation consequently involves two movements that may appear contradictory but must often occur simultaneously: preserving a recognizable connection with the organization's historical identity while developing the organizational capacity to function independently of the founder's direct intervention. The central challenge is therefore not simply whether the founder's legacy

should be retained or abandoned, but how the organizational basis of continuity can change after the founder is gone.

Existing research provides important insights into different parts of this problem. Studies of founder succession explain why founder departure can be particularly consequential when founders combine multiple roles and when their identities, ideologies, and authority are closely connected to the organizations they created (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). Research on organizational culture, imprinting, and founder legacy explains how historically grounded values and meanings may persist, while research on routines and coordination shows how activities and knowledge can become less dependent on particular individuals (Schein, 2010; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). Taken together, these perspectives provide important but relatively distinct explanations of continuity, succession, organizational capacity, and identity. Less developed is an integrated understanding of how an organization can become less dependent on its founder while simultaneously preserving and redefining the identity historically associated with that founder.

This transformation may become particularly complex when it unfolds within organizational arrangements characterized by hybridity. Research on hybrid organizations shows that organizations combining differentiated purposes and institutional demands must accommodate pressures that cannot necessarily be reduced to a single organizational logic (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013). In a post-founder setting, such arrangements may provide new institutional locations through which ownership, managerial authority, professional responsibility, organizational purpose, and accountability are exercised, but they may also create new interdependencies requiring continuing coordination. Hybrid governance is therefore relevant here as part of the

organizational context within which authority, purpose, continuity, and identity are reorganized beyond the founder.

Against this background, the aim of this thesis is to examine the organizational processes through which a founder-centered organization can move beyond dependence on the founder without severing the historical meanings that continue to define what the organization represents. The study is guided by the following research question:

How does a founder-centered organization preserve and redefine its organizational identity after founder exit as it develops organizational autonomy beyond its founder?

To address this question, the thesis develops a qualitative single-case study of Istituto Europeo di Design (IED). The empirical study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design. The primary evidence consists of six semi-structured interviews with purposively selected key informants occupying different positions within IED and the Francesco Morelli Foundation. Interview evidence is complemented by documentary sources concerning the organization's governance, institutional evolution, mission, values, Benefit Corporation status, and the formal role of the Foundation. The empirical material was analysed using the *Gioia Methodology* (Gioia et al., 2013), moving from informant-centered concepts towards progressively more abstract interpretation and the development of an emergent conceptual model (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

The analysis shows that moving beyond a founder does not necessarily require separating the organization from the founder's historical influence. Rather, organizational autonomy can develop by changing the organizational carriers through which continuity is sustained. In the IED case, functions and meanings previously supported substantially by the founder's personal presence became progressively

embedded in differentiated authority structures, organizational capabilities, institutionalized expressions of the founder's legacy, and forms of identification directed more explicitly toward the organization itself. The study therefore conceptualizes post-founder transformation not as the replacement of one individual by another, but as a broader organizational reconfiguration through which historical continuity and organizational autonomy can become mutually sustaining rather than mutually exclusive.

The remainder of the thesis develops this argument progressively. Chapter 2 builds the theoretical problem underlying the study. Chapter 3 explains how this problem is investigated through the chosen research design and analytical approach. Chapter 4 shows how the transformation unfolds empirically and develops the emergent conceptual model. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature, develops their theoretical and managerial implications, and addresses the study's limitations and directions for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 returns to the research question and summarizes the study's overall contribution.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Post-Founder Transformation and Founder-Centricity: An Overview

This chapter develops the theoretical framework for examining post-founder transformation in organizations where the founder has represented more than an initial entrepreneur or formal executive. The starting point is the emerging literature on founder-centrism, which conceptualizes the founder as a strategic, cultural, and symbolic organizational reference. Digolean and Țurcanu (2025) define founder-centrism as an organizational model in which the founder exerts strategic and cultural influence over the company and becomes a symbol of the organization itself. This perspective is useful because it shifts attention from the founder as a merely historical actor to the founder as a continuing organizational reference connected to vision, authority, culture, values, governance, succession, and long-term continuity (Digolean & Țurcanu, 2025).

This thesis uses the related term *founder-centricity* as an analytical category. The term does not imply that founder influence is necessarily beneficial or dysfunctional; it refers, more precisely, to an organizational condition in which several dimensions of organizational life may become associated with the founder's person: strategic direction, authority, cultural orientation, identity, legitimacy, and continuity. This formulation builds on founder-centrism, but it is also informed by more established organizational and entrepreneurship literature showing that founders may remain deeply connected to organizational identity, ownership-control arrangements, and post-succession vulnerability (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Wasserman, 2003).

The literature on founder succession is particularly important because it cautions against treating founder exit as a simple managerial replacement. Haveman and Khaire (2004) show that previous research has

offered conflicting conclusions on whether founder succession benefits, harms, or has no clear effect on organizations; for this reason, they adopt a contingent approach and examine how founder ideology, founder roles, and organizational affiliations condition the effects of founder succession on organizational failure. Their argument is central for this thesis because it frames founder succession as an organizationally embedded process rather than as an isolated change in leadership.

Wasserman (2003) develops a similar caution in the context of Founder-CEO succession. He argues that the first succession event, in which a Founder-CEO is replaced, differs from later-stage CEO succession because founder-CEOs usually have stronger attachment to the firms they create, larger equity holdings, greater control, and a different relationship to outside investors and successor selection. Founder-CEO succession therefore cannot be understood by simply applying later-stage succession models to early or founder-shaped organizations. This point is relevant to post-founder transformation more broadly: when the founder has shaped ownership, control, identity, and strategic direction, the movement beyond the founder involves more than filling an executive position.

Founder-centricity also has cultural and historical dimensions. Schein's work on organizational culture shows that founders and leaders may embed assumptions, values, and beliefs through what they attend to, reward, model, and institutionalize in organizational life (Schein, 2010). Imprinting theory complements this view by explaining why characteristics formed during sensitive periods may persist beyond the conditions that originally produced them (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). De Cuyper, Clarysse, and Phillips (2020) further show that organizational imprints can persist beyond the founding phase while changing their function and manifestation over time. These contributions are relevant

because they allow founder influence to be examined not only as personal authority, but also as historically embedded culture, practices, and meanings.

The chapter therefore approaches post-founder transformation as a process of organizational reconfiguration. The problem is not only whether the founder remains formally involved, nor whether a professional manager replaces the founder. The theoretical issue is how organizational functions that were previously connected to the founder can become less personally dependent and more organizationally sustained; this includes the redistribution of authority, the development of routines and coordination mechanisms, the institutionalization of founder-related legacy, and the reconstruction of organizational identity and identification beyond the founder.

This process may unfold within hybrid governance arrangements. The literature on *hybrid organizing* shows that organizations may combine different forms, identities, and institutional logics, creating both opportunities and tensions for governance and accountability (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Pache and Santos (2013) similarly show that hybrid organizations may respond to competing institutional logics by selectively combining elements from different logics rather than fully resolving their tensions. In this thesis, hybrid governance is therefore treated as part of the organizational context in which post-founder continuity, purpose, authority, and accountability are formally reorganized.

The final dimension concerns identity and identification. *Organizational identity* refers to what members understand as central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization, while *organizational identification* concerns the way members define themselves in relation to the organization (Dutton et al., 1994; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This distinction matters because post-founder continuity cannot be assessed

only at the level of formal governance or managerial systems. It also concerns whether the organization itself, rather than only the founder's person, becomes a meaningful basis for continuity, belonging, and self-definition. The chapter proceeds by progressively narrowing this theoretical problem.

2.2. Founder Centrism and Founder-Centricity: Conceptual Boundaries

The previous section introduced post-founder transformation as a process that cannot be reduced to the replacement of a founder by a professional manager. Before examining the cultural embedding of founder influence and the vulnerabilities associated with founder exit, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual boundaries of founder-centricity. This clarification is important because the literature uses several adjacent but analytically distinct categories: family business, founder-led firms, founder-managed firms, Founder-CEO succession, founder-centred leadership, and founder-centrism. These categories partially overlap. They do not describe the same organizational condition.

A first conceptual boundary concerns family business. This distinction is necessary because founder continuity, ownership continuity, and succession are often discussed in the family business literature, but the family firm is not defined simply by the presence of a founder or by the founder's personal influence. Chua, Chrisman, and Sharma (1999) argue that definitions based only on family involvement in ownership, management, governance, or succession are not sufficient to identify the theoretical essence of the family business. They propose a behavioral definition: a family business is one governed and/or managed with the intention to shape and pursue a vision held by a dominant coalition controlled by members of the same family or a small number of families,

in a way that is potentially sustainable across generations (Chua et al., 1999).

This definition is important for the present thesis because it locates continuity in the family as a collective and potentially transgenerational actor. The family business is not merely an organization in which family members hold some roles; its specificity lies in the family-controlled dominant coalition and in the intention to shape and pursue a vision across generations (Chua et al., 1999). Chua et al. (1999) also clarify that family ownership and family management are not the essence of the definition; they are mechanisms that may allow the family-controlled coalition to pursue the vision (Chua et al., 1999). The level of analysis is therefore the family as an enduring governance and vision-bearing unit.

Founder-centricity is different. It may overlap with family business in some empirical contexts, especially when a founder's family remains involved in ownership or governance. The overlap should not obscure the distinction. Founder-centricity concerns the founder as an individual organizational reference, rather than the family as a cross-generational dominant coalition. The relevant question is not whether a family intends to preserve a business vision across generations, but whether authority, strategic direction, cultural meaning, identity, and legitimacy become strongly associated with the founder's person. Family business research therefore provides a useful boundary condition, but it does not constitute the primary theoretical frame of this thesis.

A second conceptual boundary concerns the terms *founder-led* and *founder-managed*. These expressions are useful because they indicate that the founder remains formally involved in leadership, executive management, or the CEO position. They are more limited when the object of analysis is not only who manages the organization, but how the founder becomes embedded in its authority structures, cultural meanings, strategic

orientation, and identity references. Founder-led and founder-managed are therefore treated here as descriptive categories of formal involvement. They identify the founder's role occupancy more than the broader organizational configuration produced around the founder.

The literature on Founder-CEO succession helps clarify this point. Wasserman (2003) argues that the first succession event, in which a Founder-CEO is replaced, differs from later-stage CEO succession because Founder-CEOs usually have stronger attachment to the firms they create, larger equity holdings, greater control, and a different relationship with outside investors and successor selection. This contribution shows that founder leadership cannot be understood only as an executive position. The Founder-CEO is also connected to ownership, control, attachment, financing, and succession dynamics (Wasserman, 2003). Yet Wasserman's (2003) focus remains the Founder-CEO and the conditions under which this role is transferred. The category of founder-centricity extends the analysis from role succession to a wider organizational condition.

Haveman and Khairi (2004) provide a stronger organizational basis for this extension. They note that founders' identities are more tightly linked to organizational identity than the identities of later-stage managers, and that founders often control all or most organizational assets, making ownership and control less separated in founder-managed firms than in firms managed by non-founders. They also show that the effects of founder succession are contingent on founder ideology, founder roles, and organizational affiliations (Haveman & Khairi, 2004). This argument moves the discussion beyond formal managerial replacement. It suggests that founder involvement matters because the founder may be connected to organizational identity, asset control, ideological orientation, role configuration, and external support structures.

The emerging literature on founder-centrism is closer to the broader phenomenon addressed in this thesis. Digolean and Țurcanu (2025) define founder-centrism as an organizational model in which the founder exerts strategic and cultural influence over the company and becomes a symbol of the organization itself. Their article explicitly frames founder-centrism as a phenomenon involving leadership, authority, corporate governance, organizational values, succession, and professional management (Digolean & Țurcanu, 2025). This is valuable because it shifts attention away from the founder as a merely formal executive and toward the founder as a strategic, cultural, and symbolic center of the organization.

Digolean and Țurcanu (2025)'s contribution is also useful because it treats founder-centrism as ambivalent. Founders are presented as leaders with individual visions, profound knowledge, and long-term commitment, capable of accelerating innovation and establishing strong brands in early business stages (Digolean & Țurcanu, 2025). At the same time, the same model may generate vulnerabilities when founder influence is not supported by solid managerial structures and sustainable governance (Digolean & Țurcanu, 2025). The point is not that founder influence is intrinsically positive or negative; the point is that founder-centrism identifies a configuration in which the founder's influence becomes organizationally consequential across strategy, culture, governance, values, and succession.

A related article by Digolean (2025) deepens the contrast between founder-centred leadership and professional management. Founder-centred leaders are described as remaining deeply involved in strategic direction, organizational culture, long-term development, and decision-making control even after the launch phase (Digolean, 2025). Professional managers, by contrast, are described as hired executives selected for managerial competence, organizational capacity, operational efficiency,

stability, and measurable results (Digolean, 2025). This contrast should not be read as a simple opposition between visionary founders and bureaucratic managers. Its relevance lies elsewhere: it identifies two different organizing logics. Founder-centred leadership emphasizes vision, culture, personal involvement, long-term orientation, and control; professional management emphasizes structure, efficiency, formal processes, and operational continuity.

This is where the thesis adopts the term *founder-centricity*. The term is used neither as a synonym for family business nor as a synonym for founder-led or founder-managed. It builds on the emerging literature on founder-centrism, but it is formulated as an analytical category for organizational analysis. In this thesis, founder-centricity refers to an organizational condition in which authority, strategic direction, cultural meaning, identity references, legitimacy, and continuity become strongly associated with the founder's person. This definition is intentionally broader than founder-led or founder-managed because it does not depend only on the founder's formal role. It is also narrower than family business because it does not require a family-controlled dominant coalition or transgenerational family succession.

Founder-centricity should therefore be understood as a configuration of concentration. The founder may concentrate decision-making authority, ownership-control, strategic vision, cultural meaning, and symbolic recognition. This does not mean that every founder-centric organization is dysfunctional. Nor does it mean that founder centrality automatically produces dependence. The literature supports a more careful formulation. Digolean and Țurcanu (2025) emphasize both the organizational contribution of founder-centrism and the risks that emerge when it is not balanced by managerial structures and sustainable governance. Haveman and Khaire (2004) show that the organizational

consequences of founder succession depend on ideology, roles, and affiliations rather than on founder departure alone. Wasserman (2003) shows that Founder-CEO succession is shaped by attachment, equity, control, financing, and successor selection, making it analytically distinct from ordinary later-stage CEO succession.

The theoretical implication is that founder-centricity is not a pathology, but it can create conditions of organizational dependence. Dependence is not assumed; it must be specified. It becomes analytically relevant when several organizational functions remain tied to the founder's person rather than being distributed across roles, routines, governance arrangements, and collective interpretive systems. This formulation is consistent with the literature reviewed above: founder-centrism identifies the strategic, cultural, and symbolic centrality of the founder; founder succession research shows why the founder's exit may be organizationally consequential; family business research clarifies why this is not the same as family-controlled transgenerational continuity.

2.2.1. Founder Imprinting and Organizational Culture

After clarifying founder-centricity as a configuration in which the founder may become a strategic, cultural, and symbolic organizational reference, it is necessary to examine how founder influence becomes culturally and historically embedded. Founder-centricity does not depend only on formal authority, ownership, or decision-making control. It may also persist because the founder's assumptions, values, interpretations, and ways of solving problems become part of how organizational members understand the organization and act within it. This is the point at which the literature on organizational culture and organizational imprinting becomes central to the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Schein (1983)'s work provides one of the clearest starting points for understanding the relationship between founders and organizational

culture. In his early paper on the role of founders in the creation of *organizational culture*, Schein (1983) argues that the founder of an organization simultaneously creates a group and begins to shape its culture through his or her personality, assumptions, and theories of action. Yet this does not mean that culture is created immediately or automatically. For Schein, organizational culture exists only when a group has developed a history of shared learning: members must have faced problems of external adaptation and internal integration, developed solutions to those problems, and come to regard those solutions as valid enough to be taught to newcomers as the appropriate way to perceive, think, and feel (Schein, 1983). Culture is therefore not simply what the founder believes. It is what the organization learns to take for granted through collective experience. This distinction prevents the founder's influence from being interpreted as a purely personal or intentional act of transmission. The founder may introduce initial assumptions, but those assumptions become organizational culture only if they are embedded in shared learning and reproduced through action.

Schein's definition of *culture* also helps clarify why founder influence may be difficult to observe directly. Culture is not reducible to visible artefacts, declared values, formal philosophies, or written charters. These elements matter, but they are not the deepest level of culture. According to Schein (1983), culture consists of the underlying assumptions behind values and visible patterns of behavior; these assumptions guide how members interpret problems, relationships, authority, rewards, language, and appropriate conduct. A founder's cultural influence may therefore survive even when formal structures change, because assumptions about quality, decision-making, interpersonal relations, or organizational purpose may continue to orient behavior even when they are no longer explicitly attributed to the founder.

Schein (2010)'s later work develops this argument by showing how leaders embed and transmit culture through concrete mechanisms. Leaders teach organizations what to attend to, what to measure, how to respond to crises, how to allocate resources, how to reward and promote people, and how to select or exclude organizational members (Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) distinguishes between primary embedding mechanisms and secondary articulation or reinforcement mechanisms. *Primary mechanisms* include what leaders pay attention to, how they react to critical incidents, how they allocate resources, how they role-model and coach, how they allocate rewards and status, and how they recruit, select, promote, or remove people (Schein, 2010). *Secondary mechanisms* include organizational design, systems and procedures, rites and rituals, physical space, stories, and formal statements of philosophy (Schein, 2010). The distinction matters because it shows that culture is not sustained only through explicit statements, but rather that everyday behavior often teaches more effectively than written values. The meanings associated with the founder can therefore be conveyed through daily practices: what is rewarded, what is corrected, what stories are circulated, and what behaviors are associated with belonging to the organization.

At the same time, Schein (2010)'s approach must be used with caution. His framework gives strong analytical weight to leadership and shared assumptions. This is useful for studying founder-created culture, but it can also risk making culture appear more coherent and consensual than it actually is. Organizations are not always culturally unified. Members may interpret the same values differently, subcultures may develop across functions or levels, and later leaders may reinterpret earlier assumptions. Schein himself recognizes that growth and differentiation generate subcultures, and that leaders must then find ways to coordinate and align different cultural groups within the organization (Schein, 2010). For organizations that grow beyond the founder, this means that founder-

created culture may remain influential without remaining homogeneous, uncontested, or unchanged.

The literature on organizational imprinting provides a complementary way to understand the persistence of founder influence. The concept originates from Stinchcombe's argument that organizations are shaped by the historical conditions under which they are founded and that early structures may persist because they remain efficient, become institutionalized, or are supported by tradition, vested interests, or ideology (Stinchcombe A. , 2000). Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) refine this tradition by defining imprinting as a process characterized by three elements: a temporally restricted sensitive period, heightened susceptibility to environmental influence during that period, and the persistence of characteristics acquired during the sensitive period despite later environmental change. Imprinting is therefore more specific than the general statement that "*history matters*". It identifies when historical influence is especially powerful, how that influence becomes attached to an entity, and why it may continue to matter after the original conditions have changed.

For organizations, the founding phase is one of the most important sensitive periods. New organizations are still defining their mission, roles, routines, structures, membership criteria, external relationships, and ways of making decisions. They are more open to influence because they have not yet stabilized their internal arrangements. Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) note that imprinting research has been applied across several levels of analysis, including organizational collectives, single organizations, organizational building blocks such as roles and routines, and individuals. This multilevel view is valuable because founder influence may not remain confined to abstract culture. It can become embedded in specific

organizational building blocks: roles, routines, practices, hiring models, coordination mechanisms, and interpretive schemes.

This is where imprinting theory deepens the analysis of founder-created culture. Schein explains how founders introduce and embed assumptions in organizational life. Imprinting theory explains why some of those early assumptions, once connected to structures and practices, can continue to shape the organization beyond the founding period. The two perspectives are related, but they are not identical. Culture theory focuses on shared assumptions and the mechanisms through which they are learned and transmitted. Imprinting theory focuses on the historical conditions under which certain characteristics are acquired and on their persistence over time. When combined, they make it possible to understand founder influence as both cultural and historical: cultural because it concerns meanings, assumptions, and practices; historical because it is rooted in early periods of organizational formation that continue to affect later development.

Johnson (2007) adds an important correction to a purely structural reading of imprinting. In her study of the founding of the Paris Opera, she argues that imprinting should not be understood as a mechanical process through which the environment simply stamps its features onto a new organization. The founding context matters, but it does not act by itself. Organizational imprinting at founding involves cultural entrepreneurship: founders and other key actors actively select, recombine, and incorporate available cultural, economic, political, and organizational elements into the new organization (Johnson, 2007). Founders therefore do not create organizations from nothing, but they also do not merely reproduce their environment. They work with available materials, such as institutional models, cultural meanings, stakeholder expectations, legal forms, organizational templates, resources, and narratives of legitimacy. Through

this process, certain elements are incorporated while others are excluded. The founder's choices, interpretations, and interactions with stakeholders affect which features of the environment become part of the organization (Johnson, 2007). Founding is therefore not only a moment of origin. It is a process of selection.

This point is important for the study of founder-centric organizations because it shows that founder imprinting is not merely the persistence of a founder's personal values. It is the organizationalization of selected meanings, models, and practices. A founder may bring a vision, but that vision becomes an organizational imprint only through its translation into arrangements that other people can recognize, enact, and reproduce. These arrangements may include formal structures, but also stories, norms, role expectations, symbolic references, criteria of legitimacy, and everyday ways of working. Johnson (2007) also shows that stakeholders can alter the imprinting process: powerful external actors may reinforce, redirect, or transform the founder's initial project during the founding phase. Founder imprinting is therefore agency-driven, but not necessarily founder-controlled.

A similar processual sensitivity appears in Kimberly's work on the creation of organizations. Kimberly (1979) argues that the conditions surrounding organizational birth and early development can have consequences for later organizational life, much as the early development of a child may affect later development. His longitudinal study of a new medical school shows that organizational birth is shaped by both situational constraints and the ambition and vision of key individuals, particularly the first dean, whose personality, goals, and entrepreneurial abilities strongly influenced the school's early structure and results (Kimberly, 1979). The value of this contribution lies in its biographical view of organizational development: birth matters, but it is not the whole

story. Kimberly (1979)'s analysis also introduces a useful tension between initiation, innovation, and institutionalization. New organizations must first get off the ground; then they must develop strategies for longer-term survival and growth (Kimberly, 1979). What makes an organization innovative in its early stages may later become difficult to maintain, because institutionalization requires greater stability, predictability, and reduced ambiguity (Kimberly, 1979). This argument connects directly to the problem of founder imprinting. The founder's early influence may provide energy, distinctiveness, and direction, but the organization cannot rely indefinitely on the conditions of its birth. At some point, the imprint must either be institutionalized, revised, or translated into more durable organizational forms.

Research on organizational blueprints provides a more concrete illustration of this process. Baron, Hannan, and Burton (1999) examine how founders' employment models in young technology firms influence later patterns of managerial intensity and bureaucratization. Their study identifies several employment blueprints, including engineering, star, commitment, bureaucracy, and autocracy models, each built around different assumptions about attachment, selection, and coordination/control (Baron et al., 1999). Their results suggest that founders' models leave enduring effects on subsequent organizational structure, including the development of administrative and managerial roles (Baron et al., 1999). Founder imprinting is therefore not only cultural in the narrow sense of values or beliefs, it can also shape organizational architecture. This contribution matters because it makes the imprint visible in organizational design. A founder's assumptions about people, control, expertise, loyalty, autonomy, or hierarchy may become embedded in hiring practices, reporting lines, promotion systems, managerial roles, and coordination mechanisms. In founder-centric organizations, the imprint may therefore operate through a double channel: it shapes how members

interpret the organization, and it shapes the practical arrangements through which work is organized.

Fauchart and Gruber (2011) add another layer by linking founder identity to new firm creation. Drawing on social identity theory, they show that founders attach different meanings to entrepreneurship and that these meanings shape key decisions in emerging firms (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). Their typology distinguishes Darwinian, communitarian, and missionary founder identities. These identity types correspond to different understandings of the firm: as an economic object, as a community-related object, or as a vehicle for advancing a broader social cause (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). Their findings show that founders' self-concepts can be imprinted onto start-ups through strategic decisions concerning market segments, customer needs, and resources and capabilities (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). This source is complementary to imprinting theory because it shows that the founder's identity can enter the organization through decisions made at the moment of creation. If a founder understands the organization primarily as a market actor, a community actor, or a mission-driven actor, that understanding can shape what the organization does, whom it serves, and which capabilities it develops.

The persistence of founder imprinting becomes more complex once the founder is no longer the main actor sustaining it. De Cuyper, Clarysse, and Phillips (2020) address precisely this issue. Building on Stinchcombe (1965), Selznick (1949; 1957), Johnson (2007), and Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) they study how an organizational imprint evolves beyond the founding phase, especially after the founders leave the venture (De Cuyper et al., 2020). Their argument is important because much imprinting research assumes persistence but says less about the mechanisms through which imprints are carried forward, modified, or layered over time. De Cuyper et al. (2020) show that an initial imprint may endure, but its

function and manifestation can change. Their process model identifies both *bottom-up* and *top-down* dynamics. At the *bottom-up level*, organizational members may reinforce the initial imprint because they are attracted to the organization's values and purpose, share those values with others, and feel ownership over the organization's original character (De Cuyper et al., 2020). This process is called *imprinting reinforcement* (De Cuyper et al., 2020). This means that founder imprinting can persist even when the founder is absent, because members themselves become carriers of the imprint. The founder is no longer the only source of continuity. Continuity is distributed through members' beliefs, practices, and interpretations.

At the *top-down level*, later leadership may reshape the imprint through *reimprinting processes*. De Cuyper et al. (2020) identify *imprint reforming* and *imprint coupling* as mechanisms through which new leadership and external pressures modify the initial imprint without fully erasing it. *Imprint reforming* refers to the adjustment of the original imprint. *Imprint coupling* refers to the connection of the initial imprint with new organizational demands or external expectations (De Cuyper et al., 2020). The outcome is what the authors call a *sedimented imprint*: a layered configuration in which the original imprint remains visible, but is combined with subsequent layers of meaning, practice, and strategic orientation (De Cuyper et al., 2020). This is one of the most useful insights for a post-founder perspective: founder imprinting should not be treated as a frozen inheritance. It can persist without remaining identical. It can be reinforced by organizational members, reworked by later leaders, and coupled with new environmental, strategic, managerial, or institutional demands. The founder's legacy is therefore not simply retained or lost; it is worked on.

The combination of Schein (1983), imprinting theory, Johnson (2007), Baron et al. (1999), Fauchart and Gruber (2011), Kimberly (1979), and De Cuyper et al. (2020) allows founder imprinting to be understood as a layered process. At the first level, founders introduce assumptions, values, and theories of action into the group they create (Schein, 1983). At the second level, founding conditions and founder choices leave characteristics that may persist beyond the founding phase (Stinchcombe A. L., 1965; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). At the third level, imprinting occurs through cultural entrepreneurship, because founders and stakeholders select and incorporate some elements of the founding context rather than others (Johnson, 2007). At the fourth level, these imprints may become embedded in organizational blueprints, employment models, roles, routines, and structures (Baron et al., 1999). At the fifth level, organizational members and later leaders may reinforce, reform, or couple the original imprint with new demands, producing continuity through transformation rather than mere repetition (De Cuyper et al., 2020).

Seen in this way, founder imprinting is not only a matter of memory, it is an organizational process. It links the founder's assumptions to cultural learning, connects early decisions to later structures, and helps explain why certain ways of interpreting the organization may remain salient even after formal leadership arrangements change. This does not mean that all founder imprints are equally strong or equally durable, nor does it mean that founder-created culture is necessarily coherent, beneficial, or uncontested. The literature points to a more careful interpretation: founder influence may persist when early assumptions, meanings, and practices become embedded in collective experience and organizational arrangements; but that persistence depends on mechanisms of reinforcement, institutionalization, reinterpretation, and use.

2.2.2. Founder Exit and Post-Founder Vulnerability

The exit of a founder represents a theoretically delicate passage because it may affect organizational dimensions that are not reducible to formal leadership. Haveman and Khairé (2004) show that founders' identities are more tightly linked to organizational identity than the identities of later-stage managers, that founders often control all or most organizational assets, and that organizational strategic orientations often change after founder departure. They also argue that founder succession may require the redefinition of managerial positions and the rerouting of communication and decision-making lines, especially when the founder occupied multiple organizational roles (Haveman & Khairé, 2004). In this sense, founder exit can affect identity, ownership-control, strategic orientation, role configuration, and decision-making arrangements at the same time.

Haveman and Khairé (2004) offer the most relevant starting point for understanding why founder exit should not be treated as a uniform event. Their study begins from the observation that previous research on managerial succession and founder succession has produced conflicting conclusions: succession may revitalize organizations by bringing new information, new skills, and better adaptation to the environment; others treat succession as disruptive because it can interrupt routines, command structures, and employee security; still others find little or no relationship between succession and performance (Haveman & Khairé, 2004). This disagreement leads them to adopt a contingent approach, according to which the effects of founder succession depend on what the founder represented inside the organization, particularly in terms of ideology, organizational roles, and affiliations (Haveman & Khairé, 2004).

The specificity of founder exit lies partly in the nature of the founder's connection to the organization. Haveman and Khairé (2004)

argue that founders' identities are more tightly linked to organizational identity than the identities of later-stage managers, and that founders often control all or most organizational assets, making ownership and control less separated in founder-managed firms than in firms managed by non-founders. They also note that organizational strategic orientations often change after the founder's departure, partly because successors to founders frequently come from outside the focal organization (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). The point is not simply that the founder holds a senior role; the point is that the founder may embody a bundle of organizational functions that are analytically distinct but practically intertwined: ownership, authority, vision, identity, legitimacy, and coordination.

This helps explain why founder exit may generate post-founder *vulnerability*. Vulnerability, in this thesis, does not refer to inevitable failure. It refers to a condition in which the organization must continue without the person who previously connected several organizational dimensions at once. If the founder was only one executive among others, the transition may be closer to ordinary managerial succession. If the founder was also a central source of authority, identity, ideology, and decision-making, the transition is deeper. The organization must then clarify where authority now resides, how decisions are made, which aspects of the founder's vision remain binding, and how continuity can be maintained without depending on the founder's personal presence.

Haveman and Khaire's contingent model develops this point through three factors: *founder ideology*, *founder roles*, and *organizational affiliations*. Their first argument concerns *ideology*. They define ideological zeal as an intense commitment to a coherent set of principles or beliefs that channels social behavior toward some ends and away from others (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). When organizations are born from a strong founder ideology, that ideology may become embodied in goals,

structures, products, routines, and the organization's distinctive character (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). In such cases, founder succession can be especially difficult because the departing founder removes a source of vision and direction that may be hard for successors to reproduce with the same intensity (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). The risk is not only operational, it concerns the continuity of meaning.

The second factor concerns the *founder's organizational roles*. Founders differ in the degree of control they exercise over organizational activities. Haveman and Khaire (2004) distinguish, for instance, between founders occupying line positions and those occupying staff positions, arguing that line roles give founders greater ability to shape the organization's expressed ideology. They also argue that the exit of a founder occupying multiple managerial roles is likely to be more disruptive than the exit of a founder occupying a single role, because more managerial positions must be redefined and more communication and decision-making lines must be redrawn (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). This is a crucial point for understanding post-founder vulnerability. The problem is not only that "the founder leaves" but what must be rebuilt once the founder's roles are no longer held together by the same person.

The third factor concerns *organizational affiliations*. Haveman and Khaire (2004) argue that ties to other supporting organizations can act as substitutes for departing founders and buffer organizations from disruptions after founder succession. Such buffering can take two forms: *resource buffering* provides access to money, goods, information, and technology, while *institutional buffering* provides legitimacy and helps maintain the organization's distinctive character (Haveman & Khaire, 2004). This observation widens the frame: founder exit does not leave an organization facing only an internal leadership problem, it also raises a question about external support and institutional anchoring. When

founder-related continuity can be supported by other organizations, the transition may be less exposed to rupture.

The succession process itself is addressed more directly by Dyck, Mauws, Starke, and Mischke (2002). Their contribution is useful because they criticize the tendency to focus mainly on post-succession performance while giving less attention to the actual process through which succession unfolds (Dyck et al., 2002). They use the metaphor of a *relay race* to identify four factors that shape executive succession: sequence, timing, baton-passing technique, and communication (Dyck et al., 2002). Sequence concerns whether the successor has the skills and experience required to lead the organization in its next phase. Timing concerns whether the leadership baton is transferred too quickly, too slowly, or at the right moment. Technique concerns how the transfer is achieved. Communication concerns cooperation, trust, and clarity between incumbent and successor (Dyck et al., 2002).

The processual perspective of Dyck et al. (2002) is useful because it shows that succession is not exhausted by the appointment of a new leader. Their case demonstrates that succession may fail even when the successor appears to possess appropriate skills, because the transfer of authority depends on timing, technique, communication, and the actual movement of control from one actor to another (Dyck et al., 2002). In particular, they distinguish between becoming the titular head of an organization and actually being in charge, showing that the formal transfer of title does not necessarily coincide with the transfer of control (Dyck et al., 2002). For founder exit, this distinction is especially relevant: formal authority can be reassigned, but informal legitimacy, tacit knowledge, personal trust, and symbolic recognition are harder to transfer.

The notion of *baton-passing technique* is therefore important for post-founder vulnerability. Dyck et al. (2002) show that succession

requires clarity about what the incumbent is letting go and what the successor is taking up. In a founder-centric organization, however, what must be transferred may not be limited to formal managerial responsibility, it may also include authority over strategic direction, interpretation of the founder's vision, coordination among organizational units, and the capacity to legitimate decisions that were previously accepted because they were connected to the founder. The vulnerability of founder exit therefore lies partly in the fact that the organizational "baton" is not a single object. It is a set of roles, meanings, expectations, and decision-making references that may have been personalized in the founder.

Ip and Jacobs (2006) offer a broad review of business succession. They define business succession planning in broad terms as planning for the future transfer of ownership and/or top management and distinguish succession planning from replacement planning: *replacement planning* is closer to risk or crisis management for the unplanned loss of key personnel, while *succession planning* is a longer-term and more extensive approach to developing and replacing key individuals (Ip & Jacobs, 2006). They also note that succession may involve transfer to family members, employees, or external buyers, and that the aim is business continuity, at least in the short term (Ip & Jacobs, 2006). This broader framing is useful because it confirms that succession is not only a family issue. It is a continuity issue.

Still, the review by Ip and Jacobs (2006) also shows that much business succession planning literature is fragmented and especially concerned with small and family-owned businesses. For a thesis concerned with founder-centricity, this fragmentation is theoretically relevant. The available literature offers many tools for thinking about planned transfer, successor development, ownership transfer, family continuity, and business survival. It is less developed when the problem is

the organizational reconstitution of founder-related authority, identity, and cultural continuity after the founder is absent. The gap is not that succession literature ignores continuity. It does not. The gap is that continuity is often framed around leadership transfer or family/business transfer, while founder-centric organizations may require the transformation of a broader organizational configuration.

A complementary perspective is offered by Beyer and Browning (1999)'s study of SEMATECH¹ and the routinization of Robert Noyce's charismatic leadership. Their case is highly relevant because it examines how the vision of a central, charismatic founding leader persisted after his sudden death. Drawing on Weberian ideas of *charisma* and *routinization*, Beyer and Browning argue that charisma is inherently unstable unless it is transformed into institutional patterns capable of giving it permanence over time (Beyer & Browning, 1999). In their account, routinization involves several elements: the development of administrative structures, the transfer of charisma through cultural forms, the incorporation of the charismatic mission into organizational traditions, the selection of a successor, and the continued coherence of the organization around the mission (Beyer & Browning, 1999).

This contribution is important because it shows that the death of a central leader does not necessarily erase the vision associated with that leader. In Beyer and Browning (1999)'s case, Noyce died suddenly before the full success of SEMATECH was realized and the organization went through a period of shock and grief. However, organizational members then redirected their emotions and energy toward carrying on the mission he had helped establish (Beyer & Browning, 1999). Continuity was

¹ SEMATECH (Semiconductor Manufacturing Technology) is a U.S. research consortium founded in 1988 by semiconductor manufacturers, with the involvement of the U.S. Defense Department, to conduct cooperative precompetitive research, development, and testing in response to the growing competitive pressure from the Japanese semiconductor industry. Bob Noyce became its first Chief Executive Officer (Beyer & Browning, 1999).

supported not only by personal loyalty to Noyce, but also by structures, practices, rituals, participative decision-making mechanisms, and a mission that had already been partly detached from his personal presence (Beyer & Browning, 1999). The theoretical implication is that founder exit is less vulnerable when the founder's charisma, vision, or symbolic authority has already been translated into organizational arrangements that others can enact.

Beyer and Browning (1999) are also useful because they prevent two opposite simplifications. On the one hand, their study shows that the death of a central leader can have an emotional and symbolic effect on organizational members; it is not only an administrative transition. On the other hand, it shows that continuity is possible when the leader's vision has been routinized before or during the transition. The organization does not need to remain centered on the leader's person in order to remain connected to the leader's mission. Indeed, in their case, Noyce himself did not want SEMATECH to become focused on him personally; he wanted others to adopt the organization's ideas and make them their own (Beyer & Browning, 1999). This distinction is particularly valuable for understanding post-founder transformation: the goal is not necessarily to preserve personal dependence on the founder, but to transform founder-related meaning into shared organizational commitments, practices, and structures.

This is where the connection with imprinting becomes useful as a bridge to the previous section, without repeating its full theoretical development. De Cuyper, Clarysse, and Phillips (2020) show that an organizational imprint can evolve beyond the founding phase and beyond the direct influence of founders. In their study, founders left early, leaving limited ongoing managerial influence over how the initial imprint was carried forward; the imprint continued through the interaction of

organizational members, new leadership, and the external environment (De Cuyper et al., 2020). This prevents a simplistic reading of founder exit. Founder absence does not automatically erase the founder's imprint. It may instead trigger work of preservation, reinterpretation, and layering.

Post-founder vulnerability should therefore be understood as a transitional condition, not as a final outcome. The founder's departure may destabilize *authority* if decision-making had been personalized; *coordination* if communication lines had depended on the founder's direct intervention; *identity* if members had understood the organization primarily through the founder's vision or presence and *continuity* if founder-created assumptions had not yet been sufficiently embedded in practices, roles, and governance arrangements (De Cuyper et al., 2020).

2.3. From Founder Dependence to Organizational Independence

The next theoretical step is to examine how organizations can reduce this dependence and develop greater *organizational independence*. In this thesis, organizational independence does not mean detachment from the founder's legacy, rather it refers to the organization's capacity to sustain direction, coordination, decision-making, and mission continuity without requiring the founder's direct intervention as the main source of authority or meaning. This distinction is important because post-founder transformation should not be interpreted as a simple movement from informality to bureaucracy. Founder-dependent organizations may contain valuable tacit knowledge, strong cultural commitment, and a coherent sense of purpose. The problem is not that founder influence must disappear, but that founder-related functions need to become less personally dependent and more organizationally supported. The organization must therefore develop structures, practices, and capabilities that allow members to act coherently beyond the founder.

The literature on founder succession in social enterprises is particularly useful for this transition. Bacq, Janssen, and Noël (2019) argue that, in social enterprises, the viability of the primary social mission is tested when the founder leaves the organization. Their argument is not limited to leadership replacement; because founders may imprint their vision and values on the mission, their departure may threaten not only organizational survival but also the conduct of the mission itself (Bacq et al., 2019). This insight is relevant for founder-centric organizations more broadly: when the founder has acted as a central interpreter of purpose, the organization must find ways to preserve mission continuity without relying exclusively on the founder's personal presence.

Bacq et al. (2019) develop the concept of *social entrepreneur centrality* to describe the founder's central role in shaping the conceptualization and conduct of organizational activities in social enterprises. The concept is useful because it captures a form of dependence that is not merely administrative: it concerns the founder's influence over mission, culture, decision-making, and members' interpretation of what the organization is meant to do. In this sense, founder dependence is not only a matter of control. It is also a matter of meaning. Organizational independence, by contrast, requires that mission interpretation, decision-making, and coordination become less concentrated in the founder and more distributed through organizational structures, roles, and practices.

The transition from founder dependence to organizational independence also involves a managerial dimension. Hwang and Powell (2009) provide a useful lens because they examine how *professionalism* and *rationalization* affect mission-oriented organizations without relying on family business assumptions. In their study of nonprofit organizations, rationalization is expressed through practices such as strategic planning, independent financial audits, quantitative program evaluation, and the use

of consultants (Hwang & Powell, 2009). These practices make organizational activities more explicit, measurable, accountable, and communicable. They may therefore support independence by reducing reliance on tacit, personalized, or informal coordination.

At the same time, Hwang and Powell (2009) caution that managerial rationalization is not neutral. They note that professionalization can produce tensions when nonprofit organizations adopt more methodical and bureaucratic procedures, and that such processes may raise concerns about the dominance of instrumental orientations over expressive goals. This point is crucial for the present thesis. Organizational independence cannot be equated with the uncritical adoption of managerial tools; the challenge is to build capacity without weakening the cultural and mission-related elements that gave the organization its distinctive character.

The logic of this section is therefore not that founder dependence is replaced by professional management in a linear way. Rather, the transition involves a more complex process of organizationalization. Founder-related authority, knowledge, and meaning must be translated into roles, routines, planning practices, evaluative systems, coordination mechanisms, and governance arrangements. Some of these elements make the organization more autonomous from the founder's person; others preserve continuity with the founder's original project.

2.3.1. Managerial Rationalization, Routines and Organizational Capacity Beyond the Founder

The first dimension of organizational independence concerns the development of managerial capacity beyond the founder. This formulation builds on founder succession research showing that founders may be closely connected to organizational identity, ownership-control arrangements, ideology, role configuration, and decision-making lines,

and on research on social entrepreneur centrality showing that founder succession may threaten the conduct of the mission when the founder has strongly shaped organizational activities and values (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Wasserman, 2003; Bacq et al., 2019). In founder-dependent organizations, the issue is not necessarily the absence of managerial capacity, but the fact that coordination, decision criteria, mission interpretation, and organizational continuity may remain strongly connected to the founder's role, knowledge, and authority. After the founder's exit, this configuration becomes difficult to sustain; the organization must therefore make some of its coordination mechanisms, decision criteria, and managerial responsibilities more explicit. In this sense, the movement beyond founder dependence is not only a redistribution of formal authority, but also a process through which the organization develops the capacity to coordinate action, preserve knowledge, and make decisions without relying on the founder as the main source of interpretation and intervention.

This process can be described as *managerial rationalization*. Following Hwang and Powell (2009), rationalization can be understood as the integration of more formalized roles, rules, procedures, accounts, and evaluative practices into organizational life. These practices may include strategic planning, financial auditing, quantitative program evaluation, and external expertise, but the broader point is that organizational activity becomes more visible, comparable, and accountable (Hwang & Powell, 2009). Strategic planning makes organizational priorities more explicit over a defined period of time; financial audits increase accountability in relation to financial resources; program evaluations create criteria for assessing activities and outcomes; and consultants or external experts may introduce methods and knowledge that are not dependent on internal tradition alone (Hwang & Powell, 2009). For a post-founder organization, this matters because managerial rationalization can create shared

organizational references for priorities, responsibilities, evaluation, and accountability. These references may reduce reliance on personalized authority, especially when they are combined with routines and coordination mechanisms that distribute knowledge and action across multiple actors (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Becker, 2004). This shift is especially relevant in founder-centric organizations because the founder may have functioned as the person who connected purpose, judgement, and action. Managerial rationalization can help by creating organizational supports through which judgement can be distributed, discussed, and enacted by actors other than the founder (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Becker, 2004). This does not mean replacing judgement with procedure. It means making judgement less dependent on one person.

Bacq et al. (2019) show why this issue is particularly relevant in mission-oriented organizations. In social enterprises, founder succession may put the social mission itself at risk because the founder's vision and values may be deeply imprinted on the organization. They also note that organizational members may perceive succession-related changes as threats to organizational culture and social mission (Bacq et al., 2019). The point is not that social enterprises and founder-centric organizations are identical. The relevant contribution is more specific: when a founder is closely tied to mission and meaning, succession becomes an organizational problem rather than a merely positional one. Managerial capacity therefore cannot be built only through formalization. It must also preserve the mission-related meanings that members associate with the organization, otherwise it can generate resistance or disengagement (Bacq et al., 2019).

For this reason, organizational independence requires a careful balance between capacity-building and continuity. Hwang and Powell (2009) show that managerial professionals and management training are

associated with higher levels of organizational rationalization in nonprofit organizations. This suggests that managerial knowledge can introduce planning, assessment, and accountability practices into mission-oriented organizations. Yet the same authors also warn that professionalization may have consequences for core identity, participation, experimentation, and the balance between instrumental and expressive goals (Hwang & Powell, 2009). Managerial capacity is therefore ambivalent: it can strengthen the organization, but it can also reshape how the organization understands its purpose (Hwang & Powell, 2009). This ambivalence is central to post-founder transformation. If the organization remains too dependent on the founder's personal authority, it may struggle to coordinate action, justify decisions, and preserve continuity after the founder's exit. If, however, it replaces founder dependence with purely instrumental systems, it may weaken the values, commitments, and forms of identification that made the organization distinctive. The problem is therefore not whether managerial rationalization should occur, but how it occurs and what it is made to serve. This is the point at which managerial rationalization connects to routines and capabilities: formal systems remain fragile if they are not embedded in recurrent practices through which organizational members coordinate, interpret, and learn.

Organizational routines provide the link between formal managerial arrangements and everyday organizational action. Feldman and Pentland (2003) define organizational routines as repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multiple actors. This definition is important because it places routines at the organizational level: a routine is not merely an individual habit, nor is it simply a written rule; it involves recurrence, recognizability, interdependence, and collective enactment. Routines may also be distributed across organizational units and locations, linking specialized forms of knowledge that no single individual fully possesses (Becker,

2004). This makes routines especially relevant to the problem of founder dependence: when knowledge is concentrated in the founder, coordination depends heavily on personal access to that knowledge; when knowledge is embedded in routines, coordination becomes more collective.

Routines also help explain how practices become stable without necessarily becoming rigid. Becker (2004) identifies several effects of routines on organizations: they enable coordination, provide stability of behavior, economize cognitive resources, and bind knowledge, including tacit knowledge. These effects are central to the problem of organizational independence. *Coordination* allows different members or units to act in relation to one another; *stability* makes the behavior of others more predictable; *cognitive economy* reduces the need to reconsider every action from the beginning; *knowledge-binding* allows organizations to preserve ways of doing things even when individual members change (Becker, 2004). These functions do not remove uncertainty entirely, but they reduce the organization's reliance on personalized intervention.

This does not mean that routines should be understood as rigid procedures. A purely bureaucratic interpretation would be too narrow. Feldman (2000) argues that organizational routines have a significant potential for change, even though they are often perceived as stable or unchanging. In her performative model, routines change because participants respond to the outcomes of previous iterations and adjust their actions accordingly (Feldman M. , 2000). Feldman and Pentland (2003) develop this argument by distinguishing between the *ostensive* and *performative* aspects of routines. The *ostensive* aspect refers to the abstract or schematic understanding of the routine, the routine "in principle"; the *performative* aspect refers to the specific actions carried out by specific people in specific times and places, the routine "in practice" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Their interaction creates the possibility of both stability

and variation. This distinction avoids two opposite mistakes: assuming that institutionalizing practices means freezing the organization into fixed rules, or assuming that flexibility requires avoiding routines altogether.

The link between routines and organizational knowledge is especially important. Becker (2004) notes that routines are embedded in organizational contexts and that their transferability is limited because it may be difficult to identify what is essential and what is peripheral, because routines may be incompatible with new contexts, or because some elements depend on tacit knowledge that is hard to transfer. This means that routines cannot be treated as universal best practices that can be copied without interpretation. They are historically and locally specific. For founder-dependent organizations, the goal is therefore not to replace personal judgement with abstract procedures detached from context, but to transform situated knowledge into practices that can be enacted, interpreted, and adjusted by organizational members.

At this point, the concept of organizational capability becomes relevant. Winter (2003) defines an organizational capability as a high-level routine, or collection of routines, that gives management a set of decision options for producing significant outputs of a particular type. Capabilities are therefore not generic competences or occasional problem-solving efforts, they involve learned, patterned, and partly tacit activity directed toward specific objectives (Winter, 2003). This definition helps clarify the relationship between practices and independence: an organization becomes more independent when its recurrent practices do not remain isolated or purely informal, but form capabilities that can be mobilized with some reliability.

Winter (2003) also distinguishes ordinary, or zero-level, capabilities from dynamic capabilities. *Ordinary capabilities* allow the organization to operate in the short term, while *dynamic capabilities*

operate to extend, modify, or create ordinary capabilities (Winter, 2003). This distinction is useful, but it should not be overstated. The purpose of the present section is not to suggest that organizations must always develop dynamic capabilities or that dynamic capabilities are automatically superior. Winter is careful on this point: organizations can also change through ad hoc problem solving, and the development of dynamic capabilities requires costly investments that may or may not be justified depending on the situation (Winter, 2003). For this reason, organizational independence should not be equated with the accumulation of formal capabilities for their own sake. The relevant issue is whether practices and learning mechanisms actually increase the organization's ability to sustain coordinated action beyond the founder.

Zollo and Winter (2002) provide a more processual account of how capabilities develop. They define a *dynamic capability* as a learned and stable pattern of collective activity through which an organization systematically generates and modifies its operating routines in pursuit of improved effectiveness (Zollo & Winter, 2002). Their central contribution lies in the mechanisms through which such capabilities emerge. Zollo and Winter (2002) argue that dynamic capabilities develop through the co-evolution of experience accumulation, knowledge articulation, and knowledge codification. *Experience accumulation* refers to learning through repeated exposure to similar tasks and the retention of experiential knowledge; *knowledge articulation* involves collective discussion, debriefing, and comparison of experiences through which implicit knowledge becomes more explicit; *knowledge codification* translates understandings into written tools, manuals, decision-support systems, guidelines, or other artifacts, and may support learning by forcing actors to clarify causal links and hidden assumptions (Zollo & Winter, 2002). At the same time, codification requires time, resources, and managerial attention, and may increase inertia or be misapplied if poorly designed.

Building on this processual account, organizational practices become less dependent on specific individuals when repeated experience is discussed, clarified, and selectively codified into organizational supports. At the same time, Zollo and Winter (2002) do not treat codification as automatically beneficial: codification requires time, resources and managerial attention, and may increase inertia or be misapplied if poorly designed (Zollo & Winter, 2002).

This balance is particularly important when founder-dependent knowledge is at stake because a founder may carry not only information, but also judgement about how to apply that information. If this knowledge remains purely personal, the organization remains vulnerable after his exit. If it is codified too rigidly, it may lose the contextual judgement that made it useful. The challenge is therefore to transform personal and tacit knowledge into collective routines and capabilities without reducing it to empty procedure. Zollo and Winter (2002)'s analysis of codification is useful precisely because it does not treat codification as simple documentation.

The development of organizational capacity beyond the founder should therefore be understood as a process of translation. The organization translates personalized authority into defined responsibilities, tacit judgement into shared criteria, informal coordination into structured processes, and founder-dependent knowledge into organizationally supported practices. This translation is never merely technical: it involves choices about what should be preserved, what should be formalized, what should be distributed, and what should be allowed to change. Through this process, the organization does not simply become more formal; it becomes more capable of acting as an organization beyond the founder.

2.3.2. Differentiation, Coordination and Organizational Integration

The development of organizational capacity beyond the founder raises a coordination issue. Once authority, knowledge, and decision-making are no longer concentrated around a central individual, the organization must find ways to distribute responsibilities while maintaining coherence across differentiated roles and units. Organizational independence therefore does not depend only on routines and capabilities. It also depends on the organization's ability to integrate differentiated activities without relying on the founder as the main coordinating mechanism.

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) provide the classic starting point for this issue. They define an *organization* as a system of interrelated behaviors through which people perform a task that has been differentiated into several distinct subsystems, with the efforts of each subsystem integrated to achieve effective performance of the overall system. In their formulation, *differentiation* refers to the segmentation of the organizational system into subsystems, each of which develops particular attributes in relation to the requirements of its relevant environment; *integration* refers to the process of achieving unity of effort among those subsystems (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). This distinction is useful because it shows that differentiation and integration are not alternatives. Specialized roles and units may be necessary, but they also create distances that must be bridged through organizational coordination (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967).

This point is directly relevant to post-founder transformation. In a founder-centric organization, the founder may have acted as an informal integrator: someone who connected dispersed information, resolved tensions, interpreted priorities, and aligned actors working from different perspectives. Once the founder is absent, integration can no longer depend primarily on personal mediation. The organization must instead develop

mechanisms through which differentiated parts can coordinate with one another, negotiate interdependencies, and maintain unity of effort.

Galbraith (1974)'s information-processing view of organization design helps clarify why this becomes necessary. He argues that the greater the uncertainty of a task, the greater the amount of information that must be processed among decision-makers during task execution (Galbraith, 1974). When uncertainty increases, hierarchy alone may become overloaded, and organizations may need mechanisms that increase information-processing capacity, including lateral relations, liaison roles, task forces, teams, and other joint decision processes (Galbraith, 1974). This argument is important because replacing founder-centered authority with another centralized bottleneck would not necessarily produce organizational independence; it would simply shift dependence from one central figure to another.

Mintzberg (1980) offers a complementary vocabulary for understanding coordination. He argues that organizations coordinate divided work through several mechanisms, including direct supervision, standardization of work processes, standardization of outputs, standardization of skills, and mutual adjustment (Mintzberg, 1980). This typology is useful because it prevents a narrow understanding of coordination as either hierarchy or formalization. Moving beyond founder-centered coordination does not require replacing the founder with one single mechanism: it may require combining different forms of coordination according to the type of work, the level of uncertainty, and the degree of interdependence among organizational actors.

Mintzberg (1980)'s organization design framework further clarifies that coordination is connected to structural choices. Design parameters such as job specialization, behavior formalization, training, unit grouping, planning and control systems, liaison devices, and decentralization shape

how work is divided and coordinated. *Liaison devices* are particularly relevant to integration across units because they support mutual adjustment through mechanisms such as liaison positions, task forces, standing committees, integrating managers, and matrix structures (Mintzberg, 1980). *Decentralization* also matters because it concerns the extent to which decision-making power is dispersed among organizational members (Mintzberg, 1980). This distinction is important for post-founder transformation: organizational integration is not the same as centralization. Moving beyond founder-centered coordination may require distributing authority while creating mechanisms that keep distributed action connected. In this sense, the organization does not have to choose between central control and fragmentation; it must learn how to combine distributed responsibility with coordinated action.

Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) extend the classic organization design literature by focusing on coordination as it occurs in everyday organizational work. They define *coordination* as the process of interaction that integrates a collective set of interdependent tasks, and they identify mechanisms such as plans and rules, objects and representations, roles, routines, and proximity as means through which coordination is accomplished (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). This perspective is useful because it moves beyond a purely structural view: coordination is not only designed through charts, rules, or reporting lines; it is also enacted through ongoing interaction.

Their integrative framework identifies three conditions that coordination mechanisms help produce: accountability, predictability, and common understanding (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). *Accountability* clarifies who is responsible for particular aspects of a task; *predictability* allows interdependent actors to anticipate what others will do and when; *common understanding* enables actors to work from a shared conception

of the task or process (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). These conditions are highly relevant to organizational independence: if members know who is responsible, can anticipate interdependent actions, and share an understanding of the work, coordination becomes less dependent on constant intervention by a central actor.

Okhuysen and Bechky (2009)'s approach also helps connect this subsection to the previous one: routines matter not only because they stabilize practices, but because they can create accountability, predictability, and shared understanding in interdependent work (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Roles matter not only because they define positions, but because they help actors understand who does what, monitor progress, and manage handoffs (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Plans and rules matter not only because they formalize action, but because they create scaffolding for responsibility, timing, and agreement (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). In this sense, coordination mechanisms translate organizational capacity into collective action.

The theoretical implication is that organizational integration beyond the founder cannot be reduced to hierarchy or standardization. Building on Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Galbraith (1974), Mintzberg (1980), and Okhuysen and Bechky (2009), it can be understood as the construction of coordination mechanisms that allow differentiated roles and units to remain connected through distributed authority, lateral relations, routines, accountability, predictability, and common understanding. In post-founder transformation, this means that the founder's integrative function becomes organizational only when coordination is supported by structures, roles, routines, lateral relations, and shared interpretive conditions rather than by personal mediation alone.

2.4. Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy

This section focuses on a closely related issue to the previous one: how founder-related meanings, values, and identity references are carried forward once the founder's direct authority is no longer available. Post-founder transformation cannot therefore be treated only as a matter of structural continuity; it also concerns cultural continuity, identity preservation, and the interpretation of the founder's role after exit.

Ogbonna and Harris (2001) provide a useful starting point because they define a founder's strategic legacy as the enduring influence of the founder's initial strategy over the actions of later strategic decision-makers. This legacy may be visible in the continued use of founding doctrines, visions, strategic objectives, aims, beliefs, and cultural values (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). Their contribution shows that founder legacy may persist not only as symbolic memory, but also as a strategic orientation that shapes later decisions.

This persistence is not necessarily beneficial. Ogbonna and Harris (2001) distinguish between founder legacy as strategic inheritance and founder legacy as strategic hangover. A strategic legacy may function as an inheritance when it offers a flexible philosophy that supports continuity while still allowing adaptation. It may become a hangover when it produces rigidity, strategic inertia, or continued attachment to objectives that no longer fit changing conditions (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). This distinction prevents an overly celebratory view of founder legacy: the relevant question is not only whether founder influence persists, but how it persists and with what organizational consequences.

Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) complement this strategic perspective by connecting founder heritage to organizational identity. They show that a founder's legacy may remain relevant after founder exit and ownership change, affecting central organizational activities, legitimizing new

owners, and supporting the preservation of organizational identity (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019). Although their empirical setting concerns a former family firm, their relevance here does not depend on the family-business context itself. The broader contribution is that founder heritage can be mobilized after ownership change to preserve, reinterpret, and strategically use organizational identity.

Their argument is particularly important because it introduces the founder as an *identity referent*. Drawing on the organizational identity tradition, Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) argue that references to the founder may become identity-relevant because, when an organization relates to its founder, it constructs organizational identity as well as continuity or discontinuity. The founder can therefore function as a label through which organizational actors associate meanings with the organization's past, identity, and future direction (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019). Yet this does not imply a fixed or unchanging legacy: the same founder may remain a recognizable reference while the meanings attached to that reference shift across ownership constellations (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019).

2.4.1. Routinizing Founder Influence and Institutionalizing Founder Values

The previous section introduced founder legacy as both a strategic and identity-related problem. This subsection focuses on a narrower mechanism: how founder influence may become embedded in organizational arrangements that no longer depend entirely on the founder's personal presence. The issue is not whether the founder's vision is simply remembered. It is how selected elements of that vision become connected to values, practices, structures, cultural forms, and routines that organizational members can continue to enact.

The concept of the *routinization of charisma* offers a useful starting point for this problem. In Weber's theory of domination, charismatic

authority rests on devotion to an exceptional person and to the mission or order associated with that person, rather than on offices, rules, or established procedures (Weber, 1978). For this reason, charisma is unstable and cannot simply continue unchanged once the charismatic figure is absent. Weber's discussion of routinization addresses precisely this problem: if charisma is to acquire permanence, it must be transformed into more stable institutional patterns, such as offices, rules, traditions, successors, or administrative arrangements (Weber, 1978). The concept is useful here because it helps explain how personal authority and value-laden vision can be detached from the individual leader and connected to organizational mechanisms. In this sense, routinization changes the nature of authority: what was originally attached to a person, an extraordinary mission, or a moment of disruption becomes connected to arrangements that can be repeated and enacted beyond the individual (Weber, 1978).

Beyer and Browning (1999)'s study makes this argument more directly relevant to organizations. Drawing on a Weberian framework, they show that charismatic leadership becomes durable only when it is transformed into institutionalized patterns. In their account, routinization may involve administrative structures, rites and cultural forms, organizational traditions, the selection of a successor, and continued coherence around the mission (Beyer & Browning, 1999). This is directly relevant to the founder's legacy because it shows that leader-related influence survives not through personal dependence alone, but through organizational forms that allow others to enact the mission and values associated with that leader.

Their analysis of SEMATECH illustrates this process. Robert Noyce's vision persisted after his death because it had already been translated into organizational and interorganizational mechanisms, including councils, cross-functional teams, meeting practices, supplier

training, regional supplier councils, research reports, and cooperative practices (Beyer & Browning, 1999). The relevance of this example lies in the process it documents: a leader-related vision became durable because it was carried by practices and structures, not only by personal admiration. Post-founder continuity therefore cannot be reduced to loyalty to the founder. Loyalty may be emotionally powerful, especially after the founder's death or departure, but it is not sufficient to sustain an organization over time. The founder's influence becomes organizationally durable when selected values or commitments are embedded in ways of working.

Schein (2010)'s work on organizational culture provides a complementary explanation of how founder values become embedded. Schein (2010) argues that founders and leaders transmit beliefs, values, and assumptions through primary embedding mechanisms, such as what they pay attention to, how they respond to crises, how they allocate resources, how they model behavior, how they allocate rewards and status, and how they recruit, select, promote, or exclude members. He also identifies secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms, including organizational design and structure, systems and procedures, rites and rituals, physical space, stories about important events and people, and formal statements of organizational philosophy (Schein, 2010). These mechanisms are more visible than underlying assumptions, but they do not create culture by themselves. Schein notes that, in younger organizations, they reinforce culture only when they are consistent with primary mechanisms; in mature organizations, they can become strong mechanisms for perpetuating assumptions, even when later leaders would prefer to change them (Schein, 2010). This is central to the institutionalization of founder values: values persist when they are supported by repeated practices, structures, rituals, stories, selection

criteria, reward systems, and ways of working that make them part of ordinary organizational life (Schein, 2010).

This process also has limits. Formal statements, rituals, or structures may preserve founder-related values, but they can also simplify them. Schein (2010) warns that formal statements usually express only a limited and publicly articulated portion of culture, while deeper assumptions are communicated through broader patterns of behavior and reinforcement. Beyer and Browning (1999) also show that routinization may fail or remain incomplete when organizational arrangements do not sustain the charismatic mission or when successors do not share the same values and sense of mission. Founder values therefore do not become institutionalized merely because they are named or celebrated; they become durable when they are connected to mechanisms that members continue to enact.

Ogbonna and Harris (2001) add a further caution. Their distinction between strategic inheritance and strategic hangover shows that a founder's strategic legacy may support continuity when it remains flexible but may produce rigidity when inherited objectives become disconnected from environmental conditions (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). This distinction prevents an overly celebratory interpretation of institutionalized founder values: the same mechanisms that preserve continuity may also reproduce inertia if the founder's philosophy is treated as untouchable doctrine rather than as a set of values open to situated interpretation.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that routinizing founder influence and institutionalizing founder values involve a selective process of translation (Schein, 2010; Weber, 1978; Beyer & Browning, 1999; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). Founder-related meanings are not preserved simply by being remembered; they become organizationally durable when

they are embedded in administrative structures, cultural forms, routines, stories, rituals, selection criteria, reward systems, and decision practices (Beyer & Browning, 1999; Schein, 2010). At the same time, this translation may change what it preserves: once founder values are carried by organizational mechanisms, they become available to actors beyond the founder, but they may also be narrowed, formalized, or reinterpreted (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; De Cuyper et al., 2020).

2.4.2. Preserving Founder Imprint Through Organizational Practices and Sensemaking

The imprinting literature is useful here because it moves the analysis beyond simple preservation. As discussed in *Section 2.2*, imprinting refers to the persistence of characteristics shaped during a sensitive period, usually the founding phase (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). De Cuyper, Clarysse, and Phillips (2020) refine this view by examining how an organizational imprint evolves beyond the founding context and beyond the direct influence of the founders. Their contribution is particularly relevant for a post-founder perspective because it shows that an imprint may persist beyond founders, but its persistence depends on later organizational action rather than on passive continuity alone (De Cuyper et al., 2020).

De Cuyper et al. (2020) show that imprint persistence is not linear. An initial imprint may be sustained through bottom-up mechanisms of *imprint attraction* and *imprint sharing*, while later being modified through top-down processes of imprint reforming and imprint coupling. *Imprint attraction* refers to the way an initial imprint attracts members whose values and motivations align with the organization's character, while *imprint sharing* refers to the way those members reproduce and spread the imprint through their own actions and interactions (De Cuyper et al.,

2020). In this phase, the imprint becomes less dependent on the founders because organizational members themselves participate in keeping it alive.

The same imprint may later be modified. De Cuyper et al. (2020) argue that, after the founders left, the initial imprint continued to guide members' decisions and actions but later became subject to reimprinting when internal and external frictions created pressure for change. New leadership did not simply erase the original imprint; it reformed some components and coupled desired changes with selected elements of the original imprint in order to legitimate those changes (De Cuyper et al., 2020). The outcome is a *sedimented imprint*: a layered configuration in which the initial imprint continues to echo, but in a renewed form (De Cuyper et al., 2020). This concept avoids treating founder imprint as either fully preserved or fully lost: it can remain recognizable while changing in function and manifestation.

Organizational practices are one way through which this happens. As discussed in the previous subsection, Schein (2010) identifies several mechanisms through which founder and leader assumptions become embedded in organizational life. For the purposes of this subsection, the most relevant are the secondary mechanisms: organizational design, systems, procedures, rites and rituals, physical space, stories about important events and people and formal statements of organizational philosophy (Schein, 2010). These mechanisms give founder-related meanings a practical and symbolic form. They make values visible, repeatable, and available to members who did not necessarily experience the founder's direct leadership. Yet practices do not preserve meaning automatically. Schein (2010) warns that formal statements usually express only a limited and publicly articulated portion of culture, while deeper assumptions are communicated through broader patterns of action and reinforcement. Founder values therefore become organizationally relevant

when practices, systems, rituals, and narratives continue to connect those values to concrete ways of acting.

This is where organizational identity becomes important. Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) show that a founder's heritage can remain relevant after founder exit and ownership change when the founder becomes an identity referent. The founder may function as a label through which organizational actors associate meanings with the organization's past, identity, and future direction, although the meaning attached to that label may shift across ownership constellations (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019). Chreim (2005)'s work on organizational identity narratives helps explain this movement: continuity and change can be managed discursively through selective reporting of past, present, and future elements, the persistent use of expansive labels, and the addition or subtraction of meanings attached to those labels. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) make a similar point by arguing that the apparent durability of organizational identity may lie in the continuity of labels, while the meanings associated with those labels change over time. Applied to founder legacy, this means that an organization may continue to refer to the founder while redefining which aspects of the founder's imprint are emphasized, downplayed, or adapted.

Sensemaking theory provides the interpretive lens for this process. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) describe sensemaking as the process through which circumstances are turned into a situation that is explicitly comprehended in words and can serve as a basis for action. Sensemaking is central to organizing because meanings materialize and come to inform and constrain identity and action (Weick et al., 2005). This perspective should be applied carefully to post-founder transformation: the literature does not allow the categorical claim that founder exit always creates an interpretive vacuum. More cautiously, founder exit may make founder-related meanings more open to questioning, especially when the founder

had previously served as a strong reference point for identity, strategy, or culture. In such situations, organizational actors may draw on traditions, organizational premises, plans, acceptable justifications, and predecessor-related narratives to make sense of what continuity should mean under changed conditions (Weick et al., 2005).

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991)'s concept of *sensegiving* adds the leadership and communication side of this process. *Sensegiving* refers to attempts to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Strategic change, in their account, involves cycles of interpretation, communication, negotiation, and revision through which an initial vision becomes more defined and actionable (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Maitlis and Christianson (2014) broaden this view by showing that sensemaking is not always centralized or coherent: middle managers and other organizational members may actively interpret events, exchange stories, negotiate meanings, and engage in sensegiving through formal and informal interactions. This matters because founder legacy may be interpreted by multiple actors, not only by formal successors.

The preservation of the founder's imprint is therefore both practice-based and interpretive. Practices matter because they allow founder-related values to be enacted through organizational arrangements such as systems, procedures, rituals, stories, routines, and decision practices (Schein, 2010; Beyer & Browning, 1999; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). Sensemaking matters because these practices require interpretation: organizational actors need to understand which parts of the founder's imprint remain central, which can be adapted, and how continuity can be narrated without denying change (Weick et al., 2005; Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Chreim (2005)'s notion of confluence is useful here because it frames continuity and change as interwoven rather than mutually exclusive, especially when persistent labels allow new meanings to be added under familiar identity references. This perspective also preserves a critical edge. Ogbonna and Harris (2001) show that a founder's strategic legacy can become either a flexible inheritance or a constraining hangover, depending partly on the flexibility of the original strategy and on later environmental conditions. Preserving the founder's imprint is therefore not automatically beneficial: practices and narratives can sustain continuity, but they can also reproduce rigidity if inherited meanings are not reinterpreted in light of changing conditions.

The theoretical value of this subsection lies in avoiding two opposite simplifications. The first is the idea that the founder's imprint simply survives unchanged. De Cuyper et al. (2020) show that imprints may persist while changing in function and manifestation. The second is the idea that founder exit necessarily dissolves founder influence. Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) show that the founder may continue to operate as an identity referent after exit and ownership change. Between these two positions, the literature suggests a more nuanced view: founder imprint can persist through practices and narratives that preserve selected meanings while also reworking them (Weick et al., 2005; Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000; De Cuyper et al., 2020).

Preserving the founder imprint is therefore not the reproduction of a fixed past. It is the continued organizational work of making founder-related meanings usable in the present. This work occurs through practices that enact legacy and through sensemaking processes that explain, negotiate, and sometimes revise what that legacy means.

2.5. Hybrid Governance, Purpose and Institutional Complexity in Educational Organizations

Hybrid organizing provides the broader theoretical frame for understanding governance arrangements that combine different institutional logics, purposes, and sources of legitimacy. Battilana and Lee (2014) describe hybridity as the combination of multiple organizational forms, identities, or institutional logics, rather than as a single organizational type. Hybrid organizations may combine elements that normally belong to different sectors or institutional domains, such as business and social welfare, market and community, or science and commercial activity (Battilana & Lee, 2014). This perspective is useful because hybridity does not depend only on multiple shareholders or on a simple mixture of public and private ownership; it may also emerge when an organization combines different purposes, expectations, and criteria of legitimacy.

Institutional complexity explains why such combinations are difficult to govern. Greenwood et al. (2011) define *institutional complexity* as the condition in which organizations face prescriptions from multiple institutional logics that may be inconsistent or incompatible. Pache and Santos (2013) develop this point by showing that hybrid organizations are often exposed to long-term institutional pluralism, where competing logics prescribe different goals, practices, and criteria of legitimacy. Their concept of *selective coupling* is useful because it shows that hybrid organizations do not always resolve competing logics by choosing one over another; they may combine intact elements from different logics in order to maintain legitimacy among different audiences and sustain organizational functioning (Pache & Santos, 2013). Hybrid governance can therefore be understood as the ongoing organization of partially

competing commitments, rather than as a stable balance achieved once and for all.

Purpose adds a further layer to this problem. In *profit-with-purpose organizations*, purpose is not only an informal statement of values; it may become connected to legal commitments, governance expectations, and accountability mechanisms. Bandini, Boni, Fia, and Toschi (2023) describe benefit corporations as profit-with-purpose organizations regulated by a legal framework that establishes explicit commitments in terms of mission, multi-stakeholder governance, and accountability structures. At the same time, they warn that the boundaries of benefit corporation legislation can remain blurred, leaving room for top-down governance arrangements and weak accountability (Bandini et al., 2023). Formalizing purpose therefore does not automatically solve the tensions of hybridity; it creates a governance framework within which those tensions must be addressed.

In this thesis, hybrid governance does not refer merely to the coexistence of several formal bodies. Rather, it refers to a governance configuration in which ownership, purpose, authority, and accountability are organized through different institutional arrangements. Foundation ownership introduces a nonprofit, purpose-bound owner into the control of a business corporation; the Benefit Corporation form embeds common-benefit commitments within the operating company; and corporate governance bodies mediate these commitments through formal decision-making structures (Hansmann & Thomsen, 2021; Bandini et al., 2023; Pache & Santos, 2013).

Educational organizations make this issue even more specific. Higher education and educational institutions are not ordinary firms, even when they operate in competitive environments or adopt managerial practices. Gumport (2000) argues that public higher education has

increasingly been legitimated through an industry discourse, while historically also functioning as a social institution concerned with knowledge, citizenship, cultural heritage, and democratic interests. The tension between higher education as an industry and higher education as a social institution creates a distinctive governance problem: educational organizations must respond to economic and managerial pressures without reducing their institutional purpose to market performance alone (Gumport, 2000).

This tension is also visible in the transformation of university governance. De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte (2007) show that public sector reforms in higher education have shifted authority and responsibility across levels of governance, strengthening the university as a corporate actor and encouraging the construction of identity, hierarchy, and rationality. Their analysis is useful because it shows that educational organizations are increasingly expected to act as coherent strategic actors, while still operating within academic traditions, professional autonomy, public accountability, and educational missions that cannot be fully reduced to managerial control (De Boer et al., 2007).

For this reason, hybrid governance in educational organizations should be examined through three distinct but connected dimensions. The first concerns ownership: how ownership structures may support long-term continuity, stability, and control. The second concerns purpose: how legal or organizational forms may formalize commitments that go beyond shareholder value or narrow economic performance. The third concerns academic governance: how educational organizations balance managerial authority, professional autonomy, regulatory expectations, and public or social purposes.

2.5.1. Foundation Ownership as a Long-Term Governance Model

The literature on foundation-owned firms uses the term industrial foundation to describe a nonprofit entity that holds a controlling, and often majority or total, ownership interest in an otherwise conventional business corporation (Hansmann & Thomsen, 2021). This distinction is central: foundation ownership does not mean that the operating company itself becomes a nonprofit organization. Rather, a nonprofit, purpose-bound foundation controls a company that may continue to operate as a business corporation. In this structure, ownership and control are placed in an entity whose purpose and governance are defined by a charter rather than by residual claimants seeking distributable profits.

A foundation is therefore not simply another type of shareholder. In Hansmann (1980)'s formulation, nonprofit organizations are characterized by the *nondistribution constraint*: they may generate surpluses, but they cannot distribute net earnings to individuals who control the organization, such as directors, trustees, officers, or members. Applied to foundation ownership, this means that the foundation may receive dividends from the company it controls, but those resources are not available for private appropriation by controlling individuals; they must be used according to the foundation's statutory purposes (Hansmann, 1980).

Hansmann and Thomsen (2021) explain that an *industrial foundation* is usually created by the company's founder and endowed with a controlling ownership stake in the company, often as an alternative to passing ownership to heirs or selling to outside investors. The transfer is generally irrevocable, and the foundation's charter specifies its purposes, governance structure, and, in many cases, its obligation to maintain control of the company (Hansmann & Thomsen, 2021). This gives foundation ownership a distinctive temporal orientation: it is not designed around

liquidity, resale, or intergenerational division of shares, but around continuity.

This point is particularly relevant to founder succession. Thomsen, Poulsen, Børsting, and Kuhn (2018) argue that foundation ownership has some similarities with family business, because it involves concentrated ownership and may preserve founder or family influence through board participation. Yet it is more radical because it involves an irrevocable transfer of ownership and wealth to the foundation, while also reducing the risks associated with succession across generations (Thomsen et al., 2018). Ownership remains with the foundation, and descendants cannot simply divide, sell, or cash in the shares. Foundation ownership can therefore operate as an alternative succession arrangement when the founder seeks to preserve the company beyond personal ownership and family control (Thomsen et al., 2018).

Foundation ownership is also connected to long-termism. Thomsen et al. (2018) argue that corporate time horizons are influenced by ownership commitment: long-term owners are more likely to internalize the future consequences of present decisions and therefore have stronger incentives to avoid wasteful short-termism. In industrial foundations, this commitment is unusually strong because long-term ownership is typically formalized in the foundation's charter, ownership is not exposed to ordinary generational succession, and the absence of residual claimants weakens the incentive to maximize short-run distributable profit (Thomsen et al., 2018). Their Danish evidence shows that foundation-owned companies display more stable ownership structures, fewer firm transitions, lower management turnover, more conservative capital structures, more long-term business decisions, and higher survival rates than firms with other ownership structures (Thomsen et al., 2018). The key point is not simply that foundations are patient owners, but that ownership

commitment can shape corporate governance by extending the time horizon of decision-making.

Børsting and Thomsen (2017) develop this argument by linking foundation ownership to credible stakeholder commitments. They argue that nonprofit ownership can reduce the incentive to renege on implicit contracts with stakeholders because no private residual claimant can appropriate the gains of short-term opportunistic behavior. Foundation ownership may therefore function as a commitment device: employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders may perceive the company as more credible in sustaining long-term relationships because the ownership structure reduces pressure to maximize immediate distributable returns (Børsting & Thomsen, 2017). This does not mean that foundation-owned firms are free from economic constraints. They must still compete, invest, finance operations, and manage performance; their distinctiveness lies in the ownership commitment that shapes how these pressures are governed.

Foundation ownership should not be idealized. Its long-term orientation can also involve governance costs. Børsting and Thomsen (2017) note that eliminating the personal profit motive may weaken incentives and make it more difficult to attract outside capital, especially when foundations are reluctant to dilute control or borrow at levels that might endanger the independence of the company. Thomsen et al. (2018) also stress that not all firms are equally suited to foundation ownership, which requires sufficient equity and cash flow to support development without relying heavily on external capital. Foundation ownership is therefore not a universal governance solution, but a specific ownership arrangement whose effectiveness depends on the fit between the foundation's long-term commitment, the company's financial structure, and the institutional context in which both operate (Børsting & Thomsen, 2017; Thomsen et al., 2018).

The institutional context matters in particular when the model is considered outside the Nordic setting in which much of the empirical literature has been developed. In the Italian legal framework, foundations must be constituted by public deed and may also be established by will (Codice Civile, art. 14). Recognized private foundations acquire legal personality through registration in the register of private legal persons, according to the procedure regulated by D.P.R. No. 361/2000. The Italian Civil Code also provides that public authority exercises control and supervision over foundation administration and may intervene when administrators act against the statute, the foundation's purpose, or the law (Codice Civile, art. 25). Where the foundation's purpose becomes exhausted, impossible, of limited utility, or its assets become insufficient, transformation must occur by departing as little as possible from the founder's will (Codice Civile, art. 28). These provisions are relevant because they show that, in the Italian context, foundation ownership is embedded in a legal form oriented toward statutory purpose, patrimonial continuity, and supervised administration.

For the purposes of this thesis, foundation ownership is best understood as a governance model that can institutionalize long-term control, not as a universal solution to governance problems. Its theoretical relevance lies in the way it separates ownership from short-term profit extraction and anchors control in a charter-bound entity with a continuing purpose. In this sense, foundation ownership connects ownership and organizational continuity. It creates a structure through which the organization may remain governed by a long-term commitment even after the founder's personal authority has disappeared.

This also clarifies its place within hybrid governance. Hansmann and Thomsen (2021) describe foundation-owned firms as a form of hybrid or social enterprise that combines profit-seeking and charitable purposes

through a two-entity structure: a conventional business corporation and a nonprofit foundation that controls it. This is different from legal forms that embed purpose directly within the company itself. The next subsection develops this second route by examining the Benefit Corporation as a legal form that formalizes hybrid purpose inside the corporate organization.

2.5.2. Benefit Corporation and the Formalization of Hybrid Purpose

The previous subsection examined foundation ownership as a form of ownership-based hybridity: a business corporation controlled by a nonprofit, purpose-bound owner. This subsection turns to a different but complementary mechanism. Whereas foundation ownership places purpose at the level of ownership and control, the Benefit Corporation formalizes hybrid purpose inside the operating company itself. The focus therefore shifts from who controls the organization to how the organization's purpose is legally and organizationally defined.

Benefit corporations are commonly described as profit-with-purpose organizations. Bandini, Boni, Fia, and Toschi (2023) define them as organizations regulated by a legal framework that establishes explicit commitments in terms of mission, multi-stakeholder governance, and accountability structures. Their purpose is to balance positive social impact with economic return, locating the organization between a purely shareholder-oriented corporation and a nonprofit organization (Bandini et al., 2023). This is the core of their hybrid character: the benefit corporation does not abandon business activity, profit generation, or market competition, but expands the legal framing of corporate purpose by requiring the pursuit of social or environmental benefit together with economic objectives.

The Italian Benefit Corporation belongs to this broader family of models, but it has specific legal features. Italy introduced the Benefit Corporation through Law No. 208 of 28 December 2015, which came into

force in January 2016 (Mion et al., 2021; Riolfo, 2020). Marchini, Tibiletti, Fellegara, and Mazza (2023) stress that the Italian Benefit Corporation is not a new corporate type in itself, but a legal status that can be incorporated into existing corporate forms, such as limited liability companies or joint-stock companies. Its hybridity therefore lies in the legal expansion of corporate purpose, not in a movement outside the business sector (Marchini et al., 2023).

Riolfo (2020) describes the Benefit Corporation as a hybrid form located between companies whose main or exclusive goal is profit and third-sector entities whose activities are directed toward social benefit and in which the distribution of profit is legally restricted or absent. In this model, directors are required to balance the interests of shareholders with the interests of individuals, groups, entities, communities, and other stakeholders affected by the company's activity (Riolfo, 2020). This balance may involve a partial sacrifice of profit when necessary to pursue the common benefit objectives that the company has chosen to include in its corporate purpose (Riolfo, 2020). The Benefit Corporation therefore modifies the grammar of corporate decision-making: profit remains legitimate, but it is no longer the only criterion through which directors' action is framed.

This legal form also differs from voluntary corporate social responsibility. Hiller (2013) argues that the benefit corporation is legally obligated to pursue public benefit in addition to returning profits to shareholders. Marchini et al. (2023) make a similar point in relation to Italy: becoming a Benefit Corporation requires a formal amendment of the articles of association before a public notary and registration in the companies register. The common benefit is therefore not only communicated through mission statements or reputational claims; it is inserted into the company's legal architecture and becomes part of the

formal basis upon which managerial action is expected to operate (Marchini et al., 2023).

The content of common benefit, however, is not always clear or operational. Mion et al. (2021) note that Italian Benefit Corporation companies are legally required to pursue one or more common benefit objectives in addition to profit, to operate responsibly, sustainably, and transparently, and to include the interests of different stakeholders in corporate strategy. At the same time, they observe that the legal definition of “benefit” is broad and rather vague, meaning that each company must formulate its own specific interpretation of benefit (Mion et al., 2021). The law creates the formal space for hybrid purpose, but the organization still has to define what that purpose means in practice.

The governance dimension follows from this expanded purpose. Bandini et al. (2023) argue that the legal rationale of benefit corporations can be understood through four aligned dimensions: ownership, mission, governance, and accountability. The mission dimension concerns the definition of a purpose that goes beyond shareholder value; the governance dimension concerns the way decision-making structures balance different stakeholder claims; and the accountability dimension concerns how the company reports and communicates the pursuit of its social and commercial goals (Bandini et al., 2023). Riolfo (2020) similarly explains that directors are required to balance shareholder interests, common benefit, and the interests of the categories of beneficiaries identified in the bylaws. The Benefit Corporation is therefore not hybrid simply because it declares a social purpose; it is hybrid because purpose is expected to affect governance, directors’ duties, and accountability.

Reporting is one of the main mechanisms through which this purpose becomes visible. Riolfo (2020) explains that the annual report must be attached to the financial statements and must describe the

objectives, actions, obstacles, impact assessment, and future objectives related to the pursuit of common benefit. This requirement links purpose to accountability: the company must not only state its common benefit objectives, but also explain how it pursued them and how it intends to continue doing so (Riolfo, 2020).

The literature is careful not to overstate the effectiveness of the model. Bandini et al. (2023) warn that the boundaries of benefit corporation legislation remain blurred, leaving room for top-down governance arrangements and weak accountability. Their empirical study of Italian benefit corporations shows heterogeneous governance arrangements: some firms adopt fully multi-stakeholder governance, others selected multi-stakeholder governance, and others remain closer to a shareholder top-down decision-making scheme (Bandini et al., 2023). They also find that many benefit corporations lack strong downward accountability mechanisms toward stakeholders. The legal form therefore creates a framework for purpose, governance, and accountability, but it does not automatically ensure substantive stakeholder participation or effective integration of benefit purpose into decision-making (Bandini et al., 2023).

This is the central tension of the Benefit Corporation. It formalizes hybrid purpose, but formalization is not the same as implementation. A company may include common benefit in its articles of association, appoint responsible persons, and publish an impact report, yet the actual integration of benefit purpose into strategy, governance, and everyday decision-making remains an organizational challenge. Mion et al. (2021) point out that the legal requirements of Italian Benefit Corporation companies mainly concern transparency in declaring the social mission and evaluating social impact, while Bandini et al. (2023) show that the regulatory framework may remain soft if governance and accountability

mechanisms do not effectively balance stakeholder claims. The Benefit Corporation should therefore be understood as an enabling legal form rather than as proof of substantive hybridity.

For the purposes of this thesis, the Benefit Corporation is theoretically relevant because it shows a second route through which hybrid governance can be formalized. Foundation ownership, discussed in the previous subsection, places long-term purpose at the level of ownership and control. The Benefit Corporation places common benefit within the operating company's legal purpose and governance obligations. Together, these arrangements help explain how ownership and purpose can be organized through different but connected institutional forms.

2.5.3. Academic Governance in Educational Organizations

Higher education institutions cannot be understood only as corporate or legal entities, because their governance is also shaped by knowledge, disciplinary authority, professional autonomy, educational missions, regulatory expectations, market pressures, and public or social purposes (Brennan, 2010; Gumport, 2000; Deem, 1998; de Boer et al., 2007; Marginson, 2011). For this reason, the literature on academic governance must be used carefully: much of it focuses on universities, especially public universities, and should not be applied mechanically to all educational organizations. In this thesis, the relevant category is the private higher education institution operating within a regulated academic field, since private higher education may also perform public functions or operate under state steering, accreditation, performance evaluation, and public-interest expectations (Kováts & Rónay, 2026).

This distinction is important because the boundary between public and private higher education is not always clear-cut. Kováts and Rónay (2026) note that public institutions may adopt private-like behaviours, while private institutions may perform public functions or be subject to

quasi-state regulation. Depending on the national policy model, private institutions may operate under state control, state steering, market-pluralist arrangements, or laissez-faire conditions; in state-steering contexts, common in Europe, they may remain subject to accreditation, capacity regulation, performance evaluation, and public-interest expectations (Kováts & Rónay, 2026). This makes higher education governance relevant to private institutions as well, provided that the public-sector origins of much of the literature are made explicit.

Brennan's (2010) discussion of Burton Clark's work provides a useful starting point. Clark placed knowledge, beliefs, and authority at the center of the organizational analysis of higher education institutions and systems. Within institutions, he distinguished between the authority of the discipline and the authority of the enterprise, showing that academic work is organized around both subject-based knowledge communities and institutional structures (Brennan, 2010). At system level, Clark's triangle of coordination identified three sources of authority: the state, the market, and the academic oligarchy (Brennan, 2010). This framework remains useful because it shows that higher education governance is rarely reducible to a single center of control. Authority is distributed across academic, institutional, regulatory, and market levels.

Gumport (2000) develops this tension by distinguishing between higher education as a *social institution* and higher education as an *industry*. In the first view, higher education preserves broader social functions, including citizenship, cultural heritage, character formation, knowledge creation, and democratic interests; in the second, it is treated as a quasi-corporate sector that produces goods and services in a competitive marketplace (Gumport, 2000). This creates a distinctive governance problem: higher education organizations must respond to economic and

managerial pressures without reducing their educational and social purposes to market performance alone.

Deem (1998) offers a related account through the concept of *new managerialism*, defined as the adoption by public sector organizations of organizational forms, technologies, management practices, and values more commonly associated with the private business sector. In higher education, this includes greater attention to finance, staff management, performance measurement, competition, quality assurance, efficiency, and the management of organizational cultures (Deem, 1998). These changes reshape the relationship between academic work and organizational control. Universities increasingly operate under quasi-market conditions, while collegiality, trust, professional autonomy, and discretion may be strained by more explicit managerial control and performance monitoring (Deem, 1998). The issue is therefore how managerial authority interacts with academic authority, not whether one simply replaces the other.

The shift from government to governance adds another layer. Although De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte (2007) examine public sector reform in Dutch higher education, their contribution is relevant because it explains a broader transformation toward steering at a distance, organizational actorhood, managerial coordination, and accountability. Their framework describes this transformation through three dimensions: identity, hierarchy, and rationality (De Boer et al., 2007). A higher education institution becomes more organization-like when it constructs a clearer organizational identity, strengthens hierarchical decision-making, and develops rationalized systems for planning, evaluation, and control. Yet this transformation remains incomplete: academic organizations retain internal differentiation, professional autonomy, and disciplinary structures that cannot be fully absorbed into corporate hierarchy (De Boer et al., 2007).

Donina and Hasanefendic (2019) reinforce this point in a comparative European perspective. They show that higher education governance reforms are shaped by supranational pressures, national legal frameworks, and institutional translation processes. Their study of the Netherlands, Portugal, and Italy challenges the idea that governance reforms simply converge toward one homogeneous model. Countries and institutions translate and adapt reforms according to legal constraints, historical legacies, and institutional specificities (Donina & Hasanefendic, 2019). This is especially relevant for Italy, where reforms introduced only limited reconfiguration of internal power relations and where academics selected through bottom-up processes retained an important position in top governance bodies (Donina & Hasanefendic, 2019). Central regulation therefore does not automatically produce uniform organizational outcomes.

Marginson's (2011) work on higher education and public good clarifies why this governance complexity is also normative. Higher education institutions produce both private goods, such as graduate status, earnings, and some forms of intellectual property, and public goods, such as knowledge, innovation capacity, citizenship, social literacy, scientific literacy, and the reproduction of relational society (Marginson, 2011). This dual production complicates governance because higher education institutions cannot be understood only through market performance, even when they operate competitively or rely on private revenues. Financial sustainability and managerial effectiveness are necessary, but they are not sufficient: educational organizations also carry professional, cultural, and social responsibilities that are not always easily measurable or immediately profitable.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that academic governance adds a distinctive layer to hybrid governance. Foundation

ownership explains how long-term control may be anchored in a nonprofit, purpose-bound owner. The Benefit Corporation explains how common benefit may be formalized within the corporate purpose of the operating company. Academic governance explains why an educational organization also has to coordinate academic authority, managerial control, market pressures, public or social value, and regulatory accountability. These dimensions are related, but they are not identical.

The theoretical implication is clear. Hybrid governance in higher education institutions, including private institutions operating within regulated academic fields, does not arise only from ownership form or legal status. It also arises from the institutional environment of education itself. The organization must remain economically viable, administratively governable, academically legitimate, and socially meaningful. These demands may reinforce one another, but they may also generate tension.

2.6. Organizational Identity and Identification Beyond the Founder

The previous sections examined how organizations can reduce dependence on the founder through managerial capacity, organizational integration, institutionalized legacy, foundation ownership, benefit-purpose formalization, and academic governance. These dimensions explain how authority, practices, ownership, and purpose can become less dependent on the founder's personal presence. One question remains: *how do organizational members continue to define what the organization is, and how do they relate themselves to it, once the founder is no longer the central personal reference point?*

This question requires a distinction between *organizational identity* and *organizational identification*. *Organizational identity* concerns the attributes that are understood as central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) use this tradition to define perceived organizational identity as a member's beliefs about

what is distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) refine this view by arguing that organizational identity may appear durable because identity labels remain stable, while the meanings attached to those labels change over time. Organizational identity is therefore not simply a fixed essence, but a relatively stable and interpretable understanding of what the organization is and what makes it recognizable over time (Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia et al., 2000).

Organizational identification refers to a different level of analysis. It concerns the relationship between the individual member and the organization. Ashforth and Mael (1989), drawing on social identity theory, define social identification as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a human aggregate. They apply this perspective to organizations by arguing that organizational membership can answer, at least partly, the question “Who am I?” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Dutton et al. (1994) similarly define organizational identification as the degree to which members define themselves by the same attributes that they believe define the organization. Identification is therefore not the same as merely knowing the organization’s values. It means that the organization becomes part of the member’s self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).

This distinction matters because organizational identity and organizational identification are related, but they are not identical. A member may know how the organization defines itself without strongly identifying with it. Conversely, a member may identify with the organization even while disagreeing with some of its values, strategies, or authority structures. Ashforth and Mael (1989) explicitly distinguish identification from internalization: identification concerns the self in terms of a social category, whereas internalization concerns the adoption of values, attitudes, or beliefs as guiding principles. Pratt (1998) makes a

similar point when reviewing central questions in organizational identification: identification concerns how individuals define themselves in relation to an organizational target, and it should not be collapsed into commitment, loyalty, or value congruence. This makes identification analytically useful for a post-founder perspective, because it captures attachment at the level of self-definition, not only agreement with organizational goals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998).

Dutton et al. (1994) explain why members identify more strongly with some organizations than others. Their model focuses on two organizational images. The first is the *perceived organizational identity*: what members themselves believe to be central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization. The second is the *construed external image*: namely what members believe outsiders think about the organization. Members are more likely to identify with an organization when these images are attractive because they support self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement (Dutton et al., 1994). For post-founder transformation, this means that member identification depends not only on formal continuity, but also on whether the organization remains a meaningful and attractive object of self-definition after the founder's direct presence has disappeared.

This perspective is useful because founder-centered organizations may connect identity and identification through the founder. The founder can operate not only as a leader, owner, or strategic decision-maker, but also as a personal reference through which members understand the organization and their own belonging to it. Ashforth and Mael (1989) note that identification with a person and identification with a group are complementary forms of self-definition, and they suggest that organizations may generalize identification with an individual to identification with the organization through the *routinization of charisma*.

This does not mean that all founders are charismatic leaders in the strict Weberian sense. Rather, it suggests that personal identification with a founder may, under certain conditions, be relocated toward organizational symbols, practices, traditions, and collective identity.

The post-founder problem is therefore not only whether organizational identity survives. It is also whether members can continue to identify with the organization when the founder is no longer available as the primary personal carrier of meaning. Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) show that a founder's heritage may remain relevant after founder exit and ownership change when the founder becomes an identity referent. Yet their argument mainly concerns how founder legacy is used to preserve and reinterpret organizational identity. The identification literature adds a further question: whether members define themselves through the organization itself, rather than only through attachment to the founder as an individual.

This shift should be formulated as an analytical synthesis rather than as an established model in the literature. Moving identification from the founder to the organization does not mean erasing the founder. Founder-related meanings may remain part of organizational identity, while members' attachment becomes increasingly oriented toward the organization as a collective entity. In Ashforth and Mael's terms, the organization can become the salient social category through which members define themselves; in Dutton et al.'s terms, identification strengthens when members perceive the organization's identity as attractive and when that identity supports self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). In this sense, post-founder identification may depend on the organization's capacity to transform founder-related meanings into

collective identity references that remain recognizable beyond the founder's person.

This process can be more difficult in organizations characterized by hybrid governance. Hybrid organizations may not offer a single, simple identity reference, because they combine multiple organizational forms, identities, or institutional logics (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Ashforth and Mael (1989) also observe that individuals can derive social identity not only from the organization as a whole, but also from work groups, departments, occupational groups, and other organizationally situated categories. In a hybrid governance setting, this multiplicity may be intensified because members may encounter different sources of meaning and legitimacy, including economic performance, common benefit, academic purpose, professional autonomy, foundation ownership, and managerial coordination (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013). Identification may therefore require recognizing the organization as a coherent collective project despite its internal plurality.

This point connects organizational identification to the broader argument of the chapter. The previous sections have shown that founder legacy can be preserved through institutionalization, practices, ownership structures, and hybrid purpose. The identification literature adds that these mechanisms matter because members' attachment to the organization depends partly on how they perceive its central, distinctive, and enduring attributes, and on whether those attributes can become part of their own self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). If founder-related meanings remain attached only to the founder as an individual, post-founder continuity is not necessarily impossible; however, continuity at the member level becomes more robust when the organization itself becomes a meaningful and attractive object of identification.

2.7. Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that post-founder transformation is not exhausted by succession, professional replacement, or formal governance redesign. When the founder has been closely associated with organizational identity, control, ideology, culture, and strategic direction, founder exit raises a broader organizational problem: how continuity can be preserved while authority, practices, governance, and identification become less dependent on the founder's personal presence (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Wasserman, 2003). This problem is particularly relevant for founder-centric organizations, where the founder may operate not only as an executive actor, but also as a strategic, cultural, and symbolic organizational reference (Digolean & Țurcanu, 2025).

Existing research offers important insights into different parts of this problem. Studies on organizational culture and imprinting explain how founder-related assumptions, values, and practices may persist beyond the founding phase, while also showing that such persistence can involve reinterpretation rather than simple reproduction (Schein, 2010; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; De Cuyper et al., 2020). Research on routines, capabilities, and coordination clarifies how organizations can make knowledge, decision-making, and interdependent action less dependent on a single individual and more supported by recurrent practices and organizational mechanisms (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Becker, 2004; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Work on founder legacy and organizational identity then shows that founder-related meanings may remain relevant after founder exit, but only through processes of selection, interpretation, and use (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019).

These contributions are valuable, but they remain only partially connected. Founder succession research explains why the founder's departure may be organizationally consequential, yet it often focuses on

succession, leadership transfer, role reconfiguration, or survival outcomes rather than on the broader reorganization of authority, identity, practices, and identification (Wasserman, 2003; Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Dyck et al., 2002). Imprinting and legacy research explains continuity, but it does not fully account for how organizations simultaneously develop autonomy from the founder through managerial systems, routines, capabilities, and coordination mechanisms (Schein, 2010; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; De Cuyper et al., 2020; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Becker, 2004; Zollo & Winter, 2002; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). Hybrid organizing research clarifies how organizations manage multiple institutional logics, purposes, and accountability demands, but it is not usually examined in direct connection with the specific problem of post-founder transformation in founder-centric organizations (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Pache & Santos, 2013; Bandini et al., 2023). Identity and identification research adds a member-level perspective, but it does not fully explain how identification changes when the founder has previously served as a central personal reference for organizational meaning and belonging (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 1998; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2018).

The research gap is therefore integrative and processual. What remains less developed is an integrated understanding of how a founder-centric organization preserves and redefines organizational identity after founder exit while developing organizational autonomy beyond the founder, especially when this transformation unfolds within hybrid governance arrangements. This is not merely an empirical gap linked to the absence of studies on a specific case. It is a theoretical gap concerning the interaction among continuity, autonomy, institutionalization, governance, and identification in post-founder transformation (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; De Cuyper et al., 2020; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

This thesis addresses this gap through the following research question: *How does a founder-centered organization preserve and redefine its organizational identity after founder exit as it develops organizational autonomy beyond its founder?*

The question brings together two movements that are often examined separately. The first is continuity: how founder-related meanings, values, and identity references are preserved, translated, or reinterpreted after the founder's direct authority is no longer available (Schein, 2010; De Cuyper et al., 2020; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019). The second is autonomy: how authority, coordination, practices, governance arrangements, and identification become organizationally sustained rather than personally dependent on the founder (Haveman & Khair, 2004; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Becker, 2004; Zollo & Winter, 2002; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).

By examining these movements together, the thesis conceptualizes post-founder transformation as a process of organizational reconfiguration. This perspective makes it possible to analyze how an organization can remain connected to its founder's imprint while becoming less dependent on the founder as the central source of authority, meaning, and identification.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Objective and Methodological Approach

Building on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, this study examines the organizational transformation that followed the exit of IED's founder, Francesco Morelli. The research focuses on the transition from an organization whose development had been strongly shaped by the founder's authority, values, and organizational influence towards a configuration capable of operating beyond his direct presence. This transition occurred alongside significant changes in IED's institutional architecture, including the role of the Francesco Morelli Foundation as sole shareholder of the Group and the subsequent adoption of Benefit Corporation status. Rather than treating these developments exclusively as changes in ownership or formal governance, the study investigates the broader organizational process through which IED has sought to preserve continuity with its origins while developing greater organizational autonomy beyond the founder.

Within this broader transformation, particular attention is given to organizational identity. The study is therefore concerned with how an organization historically centered on its founder can preserve elements regarded as constitutive of its identity while simultaneously redefining how that identity is expressed, sustained, and reproduced once the founder is no longer personally present. The main research question guiding the research is therefore: *How does a founder-centered organization preserve and redefine its organizational identity after founder exit as it develops organizational autonomy beyond its founder?*

The nature of this question calls for a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach. Qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating how organizational phenomena unfold, understanding organizational experience from the perspective of the actors involved, and

examining processes that cannot be adequately captured through the measurement of predefined variables alone (Pratt, 2009). The purpose of the present study is consequently not to estimate the magnitude of predetermined effects or test hypotheses established in advance. Rather, it seeks to understand how the post-founder transformation has been experienced and interpreted by organizational actors and how the processes underlying that transformation can be reconstructed from their accounts.

An interpretive orientation is particularly appropriate because organizational identity, founder legacy, authority, and organizational autonomy involve meanings that cannot be inferred solely from formal changes in legal or governance arrangements. In particular, the development of organizational autonomy raises questions about how aspects historically associated with the founder are preserved, reinterpreted, or translated into organizational arrangements that no longer depend on his direct presence. An approach capable of capturing meanings, perceptions, and processes is therefore more appropriate than one based primarily on the isolation and measurement of individual variables.

This methodological orientation is consistent with the assumptions underlying the *Gioia Methodology* (Gioia et al., 2013). The approach recognizes organizational phenomena as substantially socially constructed and treats organizational members as knowledgeable agents capable of articulating their experiences, actions, and interpretations in their own terms (Gioia et al., 2013). At the same time, the methodology allows the analysis to move beyond informants' immediate accounts towards more abstract conceptual interpretations while maintaining a visible connection between empirical evidence and the concepts developed from it.

The empirical analysis was therefore conducted using the Gioia Methodology, which provides a systematic approach to grounded concept development while preserving the richness of qualitative evidence. Magnani and Gioia (2023) describe it as a holistic methodological approach that combines inductive concept development with the analytical rigor required for trustworthy qualitative research. Its inferential logic develops from an initially inductive engagement with the empirical material towards progressively more abductive interpretation, as emerging patterns are considered in relation to relevant theoretical knowledge (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

3.2. Research Design and Case Selection

The research is conceived as a qualitative single-case study. This design was selected because the phenomenon under investigation is context-specific, historically rooted, and closely connected to the evolution of IED as an organization. Case study research is particularly appropriate when the goal is to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). This condition applies to the present study, as IED's post-founder transition cannot be separated from the organization's history, identity, governance structure, and internal practices.

The choice of a single-case design is based on the analytical relevance of IED rather than statistical representativeness. As Siggelkow (2007) argues, a single case can be particularly valuable when it provides access to a phenomenon in sufficient depth to generate theoretical insight. In this sense, IED was selected because it represents a particularly rich case for examining the organizational consequences of founder exit in an institution strongly shaped by the personal authority, values, and vision of its founder.

Before Francesco Morelli's passing, IED was deeply associated with his entrepreneurial role and symbolic presence. The founder was not only the institution's creator, but also a central point of reference for organizational identity, strategic direction, and decision-making. His departure therefore represented more than a change in leadership: it initiated a broader process of institutional and organizational reconfiguration.

Although the family business literature provides an important point of comparison, IED is not treated in this study as a conventional family firm. Family business definitions vary considerably, but influential conceptualizations emphasize the role of a family-controlled dominant coalition and the intention to sustain the family's influence or vision across generations (Chua et al., 1999). Similarly, Zellweger (2017) identifies family control and a transgenerational outlook as central dimensions distinguishing family firms from other founder- or closely controlled organizations. From this perspective, founder control alone does not necessarily constitute family control. In the case of IED, the post-founder transition did not involve the transfer of ownership and control to a subsequent family generation. Ownership was instead transferred to the Francesco Morelli Foundation, which became the sole shareholder of the Group. The founder's legacy nevertheless remained institutionally relevant through the Foundation and its stated commitment to preserving and developing the educational project associated with Francesco Morelli. IED therefore provides a particularly relevant case for examining a post-founder transition in which organizational continuity is pursued through institutional rather than intergenerational family control, distinguishing it from both conventional family succession and conventional managerial replacement.

The selection of IED can therefore be understood as a form of theoretical sampling. In qualitative case study research, cases are not selected because they are statistically representative of a larger population, but because they are particularly suited to illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). From this perspective, IED provides a meaningful context for exploring how a founder-centered organization can preserve and redefine its organizational identity while developing greater organizational autonomy beyond the founder.

The boundaries of the case study were defined around the organizational transition that followed the founder's exit in 2017 and the subsequent evolution of IED's governance and internal operations. The analysis does not aim to reconstruct the entire history of IED, nor to provide a purely legal account of governance changes. Instead, it focuses on the post-founder transformation as an organizational process involving the development of organizational autonomy and the preservation and redefinition of organizational identity.

The temporal focus is mainly on the post-2017 phase. The founder-led period is considered only to the extent that it helps contextualize the organizational legacy and characteristics against which subsequent developments can be understood. In this sense, the case is both temporally and analytically circumscribed: the research examines how IED evolved following the founder's exit rather than offering a complete historical reconstruction of the organization.

3.3. Data Collection

Consistent with the qualitative case study research design, the study draws on multiple sources of empirical evidence. The use of multiple sources is particularly relevant in case study research because it supports an in-depth and contextual understanding of the phenomenon and makes it possible to

examine converging evidence across different sources (Yin, 2018). Yin specifically identifies the use of multiple sources and the convergence of evidence through triangulation as central features of case study inquiry. In the present study, the empirical material consists primarily of semi-structured interviews with key informants, complemented by documentary sources.

The combination of these sources made it possible to examine IED's post-founder transition from complementary perspectives. The interviews provided access to organizational actors' experiences, interpretations, and recollections, while documentary sources contributed institutional and historical context and supported the verification of formal organizational developments. This combination was particularly relevant to a phenomenon involving both formal changes in governance and organizational processes concerning meanings, practices, continuity, and identity. The respective role of the interview and documentary material is described in the following subsections.

3.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The primary source of data consists of six semi-structured interviews conducted with purposively selected informants connected to different areas of the IED organizational context. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow the researcher to investigate a set of predefined themes while leaving space for interviewees to introduce issues, examples, and interpretations considered relevant from their own perspective. This format is particularly appropriate for qualitative research aimed at understanding organizational processes from the perspective of the actors involved (Pratt, 2009).

The interview guide was constructed on the basis of the research question and the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. The questions were organized around a set of broad thematic areas: the

interviewee's role and relationship with IED; the memory or interpretation of Francesco Morelli's role; the perceived effects of the founder's exit; the role of the Francesco Morelli Foundation; changes in governance, decision-making, and organizational practices; the preservation and redefinition of IED's organizational identity; and the relationship between continuity and organizational autonomy in the post-founder phase.

Although the interviews followed a common structure, the guide was adapted to the specific role, experience, and expertise of each participant. This choice was consistent with the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study, since the interviewees occupied different positions in relation to the organizational transformation and could therefore provide insight into different aspects and periods of the process. Interviews with actors connected to the Francesco Morelli Foundation focused more directly on governance, mission, values, and the contemporary preservation and reinterpretation of the founder's legacy, while interviews with IED organizational actors placed greater emphasis on changes in practices, organizational coordination, human resource management, campus management, and institutional communication.

The interviews were conducted in Italian, the native language of both the researcher and the interviewees. This choice allowed participants to express themselves naturally and helped preserve the nuances of culturally and organizationally specific expressions.

The six interviews involved Riccardo Balbo, President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation and Group Academic Director; Mariateresa Coradduzza, Vice-President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation and niece of the founder; Paola Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer; Donatella Pasotto, Executive Director of the Francesco Morelli Foundation; Paola Zini, Director of the Turin Campus; and Eleonora Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager at IED. *Table 1* summarizes their organizational roles, the

rationale for their inclusion and empirical contribution, and the date and mode of each interview.

Table 1: Summary of Interviews. Source: Author's Elaboration

Interviewee	Role	Temporal perspective on the transition	Rationale for inclusion and empirical contribution	Date	Mode
Riccardo Balbo	President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation and Group Academic Director	Direct experience of founder-led and post-founder periods	Selected for his dual role in the Foundation and IED's academic governance. His interview provided insight into the governance transition, changes in organizational authority and formalization, founder legacy, and the relationship between IED and the Foundation.	12.05.2026	In person
Mariateresa Coradduzza	Vice-President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation and niece of the founder	Direct experience of founder-led and post-founder periods	Selected for her personal and organizational knowledge of the founder and her current role within the Foundation. Her interview contributed to understanding the founder's values, symbolic legacy, organizational identity, and their contemporary preservation and reinterpretation.	14.05.2026	Online (Zoom)
Paola Vio Genova	Chief HR Officer	Post-founder perspective	Selected for her responsibility over human resource management and organizational processes. Her interview contributed to understanding HR professionalization, recruitment, onboarding, cultural alignment, and the formalization of organizational practices.	12.06.2026	Online (Google Meet)
Donatella Pasotto	Executive Director of the Francesco Morelli Foundation	Post-founder perspective	Selected for her operational and strategic role within the Foundation. Her interview provided insight into the Foundation's mission, governance, relationship with IED, and the contemporary translation of the founder's legacy into institutional and social initiatives.	15.06.2026	Online (Google Meet)
Paola Zini	Director of the Turin Campus	Transition / early post-founder perspective	Selected to provide a campus-level perspective on the organizational transition. Her interview contributed to understanding the early post-founder phase, local autonomy, central coordination, and organizational change at the territorial level.	18.06.2026	Online (Google Meet)
Elconora Ronsisvalle	Press Office Manager at IED	Direct experience of founder-led and post-founder periods	Selected for her role in institutional communication. Her interview contributed to understanding changes in organizational communication and how IED's history, founder legacy, and identity are currently narrated and transmitted.	30.06.2026	In person

3.3.2. Selection of Informants

The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling, based on their organizational roles, their knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation, and their position in relation to IED's post-founder transformation. The purpose of the selection was not to reproduce the organizational population of IED proportionally, but to identify informants whose experience could provide analytically relevant perspectives on different dimensions of the transition. This approach is consistent with qualitative case study research, in which informants are selected for their capacity to provide theoretically and empirically relevant insight rather than for statistical representativeness (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). It is also consistent with the Gioia Methodology, which considers organizational members as knowledgeable agents capable of articulating their experiences, actions, and interpretations (Gioia et al., 2013).

Informant selection sought to capture variation in both organizational position and temporal relationship with the transition. As summarized in *Table 1*, some participants had direct experience of both the founder-led and post-founder periods, enabling them to provide first-hand accounts of organizational characteristics associated with Francesco Morelli's presence and to reflect on subsequent changes. Other participants became involved with IED or the Francesco Morelli Foundation during or after the transition and therefore contributed primarily to understanding the emerging organizational configuration and the contemporary preservation, transmission, and reinterpretation of the founder's legacy. This combination made it possible to place retrospective accounts of the founder-led organization alongside perspectives developed during the post-founder phase.

The sample also incorporated different organizational domains. Participants were selected from positions connected to the Francesco

Morelli Foundation, academic governance, human resource management, campus management, and institutional communication. This diversity was intended to provide access to different aspects of the same organizational transformation, including changes in authority and governance, the development of organizational practices, the role of the Foundation, and the ways in which organizational identity and the founder's legacy are currently interpreted and transmitted.

The six informants were not intended to constitute a representative sample of IED as a whole, nor to support statistical generalization across all employees, campuses, or organizational functions. Rather, their accounts provide situated perspectives derived from specific organizational positions and experiences within the case. The findings must therefore be interpreted within the analytical boundaries of the single-case study and in relation to the particular composition of the interview sample.

3.3.3. Documentary Sources

Documentary material complemented the interview data by providing institutional and historical information relevant to the reconstruction of IED's post-founder context. The documents were selected according to their relevance to the organizational dimensions addressed by the research, particularly ownership and governance arrangements, the formal role of the Francesco Morelli Foundation, the evolution of IED's Benefit Corporation status, and the institutional articulation of mission, values, and organizational responsibilities. Their use was consistent with the role that documentary evidence can play in qualitative case study research by providing contextual information, supplementary evidence, a basis for corroborating information obtained through other sources, and a means of examining organizational developments over time (Bowen, 2009).

The documentary material was not incorporated into the Gioia coding process. The coding procedure and the development of first-order concepts described in *Section 3.4* were based on the six interview transcripts. Documentary sources were instead reviewed alongside the interview material to support the interpretation of the case. They were used to verify formal and chronological information mentioned during the interviews, reconstruct institutional arrangements that could not be established from participants' accounts alone, and compare those accounts with the formal representation of the organization provided in official records. This distinction preserved the interviews as the primary empirical basis of the inductive analysis while allowing documentary evidence to contribute to contextualization and triangulation.

Particular attention was paid to the nature and purpose of the documents consulted. Official organizational documents were not assumed to provide neutral or exhaustive representations of how the organization operated in practice. As Bowen (2009) notes, documentary evidence should be considered in relation to the purpose for which a document was produced, its intended audience, and its institutional context. The documents were therefore treated primarily as records of formal organizational arrangements and as institutional representations of IED's and the Francesco Morelli Foundation's identity, governance, values, and stated objectives. Where documentary information converged with interview accounts, it provided supplementary evidence; where interviews addressed informal practices, individual experiences, or interpretations not represented in official documentation, the interview material remained the principal basis for analysis.

The documentary corpus included three consecutive *IED Impact Reports*, covering the academic years 2022/2023, 2023/2024, and 2024/2025. Their consecutive nature made it possible to examine the

formal representation of IED's governance, mission, Benefit Corporation status, and relationship with the Francesco Morelli Foundation across successive reporting periods. The corpus also included IED's *Model of Organization, Management and Control pursuant to Legislative Decree 231/2001 and its Code of Ethics*, which provided information on formal governance arrangements, responsibilities, control mechanisms, organizational principles, and stakeholder relations.

Documents relating specifically to the Francesco Morelli Foundation were also reviewed. The *Foundation Statute* provided the principal formal source for its institutional purposes, governance bodies, decision-making responsibilities, and relationship with IED. This material was complemented by selected sections of the Foundation's official website concerning its mission, vision and values, objectives, activities, governance, and founder. These webpages were used to examine how the Foundation currently presents its institutional purpose, its relationship with Francesco Morelli's original project, and the translation of its stated objectives into areas of activity. Selected project-specific materials, including the *Francesco Morelli Grant 2026 Regulations* and institutional documentation concerning *The Glitch Camp 2026*, were consulted as supplementary examples of how these formally stated objectives are reflected in contemporary initiatives.

Additional contextual evidence was provided by selected institutional evaluation material and official IED webpages concerning organizational history, governance, mission, vision, and institutional structure.

Table 2: Documentary sources and their use in the study. Source: Author's Elaboration

Documentary source	Period / date	Information considered	Use in the study
IED Impact Report	2022/2023	Corporate governance; relationship between IED and the Francesco Morelli Foundation; Benefit Corporation status; mission and values	Reconstruction of the formal institutional configuration following the introduction of Benefit Corporation status and verification of governance-related information
IED Impact Report	2023/2024	Group ownership and corporate governance; mission and vision; Benefit Corporation status; formal organizational purposes	Comparison with the preceding report and examination of continuity and development in IED's formal institutional representation
IED Impact Report	2024/2025	Current Group structure; Foundation ownership; governance bodies; mission and vision; common-benefit purposes	Reconstruction of the most recent formal governance configuration and comparison across successive reporting periods
Model of Organization, Management and Control pursuant to Legislative Decree 231/2001	2019	Governance structure; allocation of responsibilities; organizational controls; formal procedures and decision-making safeguards	Contextualization of formal governance, responsibility allocation, and control mechanisms during the post-founder period
IED Code of Ethics	2025	Formal values and principles of conduct; relationship with the Foundation; stakeholder responsibilities; organizational mission	Examination of the formal codification and communication of organizational values and principles
Francesco Morelli Foundation Statute	2023 version	Statutory purposes; governance bodies; allocation of responsibilities; relationship with IED; provisions concerning governance after the founder	Reconstruction of the Foundation's formal institutional and governance architecture
Francesco Morelli Foundation official webpages: Mission, Vision and Values, Objectives, Activities, Governance, Founder	Accessed 2026	Institutional mission; values; strategic objectives; current activities; governance structure; representation of Francesco Morelli and the purpose attributed to the Foundation	Examination of the Foundation's current institutional self-representation and verification of formal information concerning its role, purposes, and governance
Selected Foundation project materials: Francesco Morelli Grant 2026 and The Glitch Camp 2026	2026	Support for young designers; social-impact objectives; educational and professional development initiatives; joint Foundation-IED activities	Supplementary evidence of how formally stated institutional objectives are translated into contemporary initiatives
Institutional Evaluation Unit material	2025	Mission and vision; organizational arrangements; coordination and communication mechanisms at institutional level	Supplementary contextual evidence concerning the operation of formal organizational arrangements, interpreted within the specific scope of the evaluation material
Selected official IED webpages	Accessed 2026	Organizational history; governance; mission and vision; institutional structure	Verification of institutional chronology and supplementation of information contained in formal reports

Taken together, these materials provided a documentary basis for understanding the formal institutional context within which the organizational transformation examined in the interviews took place. Their

role remained complementary to the interview evidence: they supported the reconstruction and cross-checking of formal organizational developments and provided insight into how IED and the Francesco Morelli Foundation formally represent their purposes, governance arrangements, and contemporary activities, but they did not constitute an independent source of first-order concepts or higher-order categories in the Gioia analysis.

3.3.4. Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Before each interview, participants were informed of the research purpose, the academic nature of the study, and the intended use of the empirical material. Interviewees were provided with a consent form specifying the research objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the possibility of refusing to answer specific questions.

Interview recordings were used exclusively for transcription and data analysis. The recordings were transcribed with the support of an automatic transcription software and subsequently checked before being used for analysis. The collected data were stored securely in digital format and were accessible only to the researcher for the time necessary to complete the research and write the thesis. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. After transcription, interviewees were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and request corrections or clarifications before the material was used for analysis. The empirical material was used exclusively for academic purposes.

The interviews were conducted in a way that respected participants' roles, availability, and degree of familiarity with the topics discussed. Particular attention was paid to sensitive issues related to governance, organizational change, and the founder's legacy. Since some interviews involved personal memories and institutional responsibilities, particular

care was taken to preserve the intended meaning of each account and avoid decontextualized or misleading interpretations..

3.4. Data Analysis

The empirical material was analysed following the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The methodology provides a systematic approach to qualitative concept development while maintaining a transparent connection between empirical evidence and progressively more abstract conceptual interpretations. Magnani and Gioia (2023) describe the Gioia Methodology as a holistic approach that combines inductive concept development with the methodological rigor required for trustworthy qualitative research. Its purpose extends beyond the classification of qualitative material: the analytical process is designed to move from organizational actors' accounts towards a theoretically meaningful and empirically traceable explanation of the phenomenon under investigation.

This orientation is particularly relevant to research aimed at explaining organizational phenomena rather than merely describing them. Magnani and Gioia (2023) position the methodology within grounded approaches to theory development, whose purpose is to generate explanations from research grounded in empirical data rather than beginning from hypotheses deduced from existing theory. In this sense, the Gioia Methodology provides a structured way of developing theoretical understanding while retaining evidence of how that understanding emerged from the empirical material. Its emphasis on concept development and data-to-theory connections made it appropriate for the present study, which seeks to explain the organizational processes associated with IED's post-founder transformation through the accounts of organizational members.

Within this broader methodological tradition, grounded theory refers to an approach to theory development in which conceptual

explanations emerge through systematic and iterative engagement with empirical data rather than through the testing of hypotheses derived a priori from existing theory (Suddaby, 2006). This does not imply that the researcher approaches the empirical setting without prior theoretical knowledge; rather, theoretical understanding develops through continued interaction between empirical evidence and emerging conceptualization. The Gioia Methodology builds on this grounded tradition while providing a systematic approach to concept development and theory building (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). In the present study, grounded theory is therefore understood as the broader methodological orientation underlying the analytical process, rather than as the adoption of Classical Grounded Theory as a complete methodological protocol.

The Gioia Methodology rests on a set of interpretive assumptions that shape the way empirical evidence is approached and subsequently conceptualized. Organizational phenomena are understood as being, to a significant extent, socially constructed through the actions and interpretations of organizational members (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Meanings attributed to organizational events are therefore not treated as secondary to an independently observable reality. They form part of the phenomenon itself and provide an essential basis for understanding how organizational actors experience and interpret the context in which they operate.

A central implication of this perspective is the treatment of informants as *knowledgeable agents*. The Gioia Methodology assumes that organizational members possess knowledge about what they do, how they perform their work, and why they act in particular ways, and that they are capable of articulating this knowledge in their own terms (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Their accounts consequently provide access to an informant-based understanding of organizational experience.

At the same time, this understanding is not regarded as the only possible interpretation of the phenomenon. Qualitative analysis can identify relationships and conceptual patterns that are expressed differently from the categories used by informants themselves. The methodology seeks to accommodate these two forms of understanding rather than positioning one as inherently superior to the other: an informant-centred representation of experience provides the empirical foundation, while a more theory-centred interpretation develops through subsequent analytical abstraction.

This distinction is materialized in the *Gioia Data Structure*, which makes the progression between different levels of conceptualization explicit. The first level consists of *first-order concepts* and is intended to represent informants' experiences in terms that remain closely connected to their own understandings. Magnani and Gioia (2023) stress that first-order analysis should adhere faithfully to informant terms and initially make only limited attempts to distil the empirical material into a small number of categories. As the number of emerging categories increases, comparison and contrast become necessary to identify meaningful similarities and differences and to determine which distinctions should be retained.

The analysis changes in character at the second-order level. Rather than remaining primarily concerned with how individual organizational members describe their experience, attention turns to the conceptual relationships that can be identified across first-order concepts. *Second-order themes* therefore represent a more theory-centred level of interpretation. Existing empirical categories are sorted, compared, and progressively abstracted so that broader patterns can be identified across the material (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Related second-order themes can then be brought together into *aggregate dimensions*,

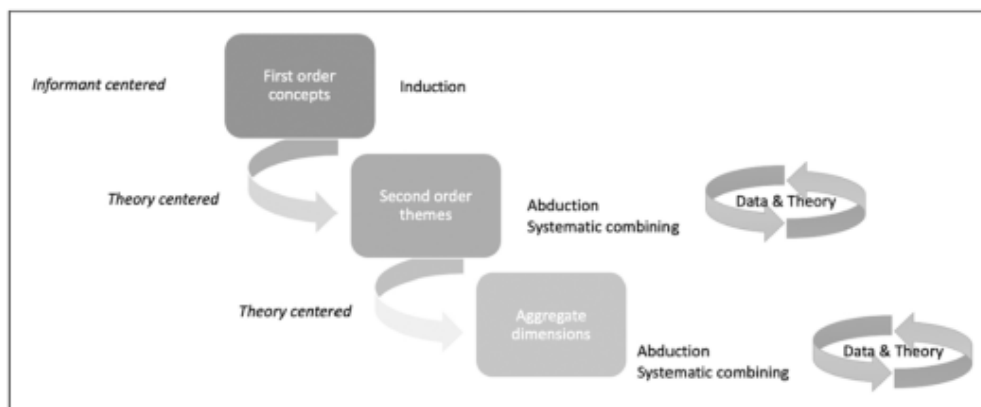
which constitute the highest level of conceptual aggregation represented in the data structure. The resulting structure retains the distinction between informant-centred and theory-centred interpretations while displaying how one analytical level is connected to the next.

This visual organization serves a methodological purpose that extends beyond the classification of qualitative data. One of the defining features of the Gioia approach is its concern with making data-to-theory connections visible. A higher-order interpretation is more convincing when it is possible to reconstruct how it developed from the underlying empirical material. The data structure provides precisely this form of traceability: it allows first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions to be read as connected stages of conceptual development rather than as categories presented independently of their empirical origins (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). In this sense, analytical rigor is supported not simply by following a sequence of coding procedures, but by making the reasoning that connects evidence and interpretation open to examination.

The progression across these analytical levels is also associated with a change in the underlying logic of inference. Magnani and Gioia (2023) describe the overall trajectory of the methodology as moving from a predominantly *inductive* form of reasoning towards an increasingly *abductive* one. First-order concept development is principally inductive, as conceptualization begins from empirical observations and informants' understandings. The transition towards second-order themes and aggregate dimensions requires a different inferential task. Empirical patterns are interpreted at a higher level of abstraction, while emerging interpretations are considered in conjunction with relevant theoretical knowledge.

Magnani and Gioia (2023) describe this movement through the notion of *systematic combining*, whereby empirical evidence and theoretical understanding are brought into interaction as the analysis develops. The relationship is not unidirectional. Existing theory does not simply provide a set of categories into which empirical observations are inserted, nor is theoretical knowledge excluded until coding has been completed. Data and theory increasingly inform one another as the analysis moves beyond description and seeks plausible explanations for the patterns observed. Abductive reasoning becomes particularly relevant at this point because it allows empirical observations to be interpreted as manifestations of broader conceptual relationships. The progression from induction towards abduction is represented in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: The Inferential Process in Developing a Data Structure. Source: Magnani and Gioia (2023)



As Figure 1 shows, induction is most directly associated with the development of first-order concepts, whereas the construction of second-order themes and aggregate dimensions involves increasing interaction between data and theory. This distinction should not be understood as a rigid separation between successive modes of reasoning. Magnani and Gioia (2023) describe the development of second-order themes and aggregate dimensions as involving an interweaving of induction and abduction. The figure therefore captures a shift in analytical emphasis:

empirical proximity remains essential throughout the process, but theoretical interpretation becomes progressively more prominent as the level of abstraction increases.

The completion of the data structure does not mark the end of the analytical process. Magnani and Gioia (2023) distinguish between the data structure and the subsequent development of a *grounded theoretical model*. The former provides a structured representation of the concepts that emerged from the analysis and of their progression across different levels of abstraction. The grounded model has a different purpose. It seeks to identify and explain the relationships among those concepts, moving from the organization of analytical categories towards an account of how the phenomenon under investigation operates or develops.

The distinction can be understood in terms of the difference between a relatively static representation and a more dynamic explanation. A data structure shows the conceptual architecture emerging from the empirical analysis; a grounded model places that architecture in motion by examining the relationships connecting its principal elements. Gioia et al. (2013) describe the transition towards a grounded model as potentially requiring a creative leap, because the relationships that form an explanatory model cannot always be obtained through further categorical aggregation alone. They require an interpretation of how the concepts already developed might relate to one another in explaining the phenomenon. Magnani and Gioia (2023) locate this step within the abductive dimension of the methodology: empirical patterns and theoretical knowledge are combined to formulate a plausible, defensible explanation grounded in the data.

This distinction is especially important because an aggregate dimension and a grounded model do not perform the same analytical function. Aggregate dimensions constitute the highest level of abstraction

within the data structure. The model comes afterwards. Its contribution lies in specifying relationships among the concepts and dimensions that have emerged, rather than merely reproducing them in graphical form. The analytical movement is therefore from categorization towards explanation: first establishing the conceptual structure of the phenomenon and subsequently examining how its principal components are connected.

Magnani and Gioia (2023) identify a third component of the methodology alongside the data structure and grounded model: the presentation of findings through a convincing, data-based narrative. Once the conceptual structure and its relationships have been developed, the resulting interpretation must remain visibly supported by empirical evidence. Findings are consequently presented through an analytical narrative in which higher-order interpretations are accompanied by evidence from informants' accounts, particularly representative quotations. Tables, figures, and supplementary empirical material can serve the same purpose by strengthening the transparency of the relationship between the claims advanced and the evidence on which they are based.

Taken together, these components define the broader analytical architecture of the Gioia Methodology. The data structure documents the progression from informant-centred concepts to higher-order conceptualization; the grounded model develops an explanation of the relationships among the concepts emerging from that structure; and the findings narrative demonstrates how the resulting interpretation remains anchored in the empirical evidence (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). The three components are complementary rather than interchangeable. Their combination makes it possible to move from detailed qualitative material towards theoretical explanation while preserving a transparent path back to the data.

These methodological principles provided the framework for the analysis conducted in the present study. Their application is described in the following subsections, presented separately to make the analytical procedure transparent, although their development was not strictly linear: coding decisions and conceptual boundaries could be revisited when comparison across the empirical material revealed distinctions or relationships requiring further examination. The resulting data structure, findings narrative, and emergent conceptual model are presented in Chapter 4.

3.4.1. Transcription, Translation, and Preparation of the Empirical Material

The analytical process began with the preparation of the interview material. All six interviews were conducted in Italian, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed in the original language, with the support of automatic transcription software, which was used to generate the initial transcripts from the audio recordings. The transcripts were then checked and revised against the original recordings in order to correct transcription errors, clarify unclear passages, and ensure accuracy before beginning the analytical process. This choice allowed participants to express themselves naturally and helped preserve the nuances of culturally and organizationally specific expressions. Working from the Italian transcripts was particularly relevant in this study because several accounts relied on expressions carrying specific organizational meanings, including references to the founder's legacy, the "IED spirit," belonging, informality, and the relationship between IED and the Francesco Morelli Foundation.

As described in *Section 3.3.4*, the transcripts were shared with the interviewees for review and approval before being included in the analytical corpus. This step allowed participants to verify the accuracy of their accounts and to clarify or correct passages where necessary. The

approved transcripts subsequently constituted a stable empirical basis for the analysis, reducing the possibility that transcription inaccuracies or unclear formulations would be carried into the coding process.

The initial analysis was conducted directly on the approved Italian transcripts. This allowed the meaning of each passage to be assessed in its original linguistic context before analytical labels were developed. The choice is consistent with the emphasis placed by the Gioia Methodology on representing informants' experiences in terms that remain faithful to their own understandings during first-order analysis (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Initial codes were therefore developed before translation, preserving as closely as possible the expressions and meanings conveyed by the interviewees rather than introducing interpretive changes through an earlier translation of the empirical material.

For the purpose of presenting the findings in English, the translation was carried out only after the relevant analytical labels and quotations had been identified for presentation in the thesis. The English formulations were checked against the corresponding Italian material throughout this process. Where a literal rendering would have changed or narrowed the meaning of an expression, semantic and conceptual equivalence was prioritized over word-for-word translation. This was particularly relevant for organization-specific expressions whose meaning depended on the context in which they had been used by interviewees and could not be translated literally without losing part of their meaning. Translation was therefore treated as part of the preparation and presentation of the empirical material rather than as an independent analytical stage.

The original Italian quotations were retained in the analytical database alongside the English analytical labels. This made it possible to return to the source material whenever the wording or meaning of a

concept required further examination and preserved the traceability between the empirical evidence used for coding and its English presentation in the thesis. The resulting corpus of reviewed Italian transcripts constituted the material from which the initial coding described in *Section 3.4.2* was developed.

For methodological transparency, ChatGPT and NotebookLM were used as support tools during the research process. Their use included proofreading, checks of linguistic consistency, and brainstorming on analytical labels. They also supported the consideration of possible groupings of researcher-generated initial codes into consolidated first-order concepts. These suggestions were treated as provisional and assessed against the original interview material before being accepted, revised, or rejected. Before using these tools, the empirical material was anonymized and any personal, private, or directly identifying information was removed. The initial coding was conducted by the researcher, who retained responsibility for the final assignment of excerpts, the development of second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, and the interpretation of the findings. AI-generated suggestions were not treated as empirical evidence or as independent validation of the analysis.

3.4.2. Initial Coding and Development of First-Order Concepts

The first stage of coding was conducted on the reviewed Italian transcripts. Each transcript was examined closely to identify passages relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. These passages were assigned initial coding labels. The labels remained closely connected to the language and interpretations expressed by participants, consistently with the principles of the Gioia Methodology and, in particular, with the emphasis of first-order analysis on representing informants' experience in their own terms (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). At this stage, coding was kept sufficiently detailed to preserve differences among organizational

experiences, practices, perceptions, and interpretations before broader conceptual categories were developed.

The initial codes were subsequently compared across the interview material. The comparison focused on the empirical meaning represented by each code rather than on linguistic similarity alone. Codes were brought together when examination of the corresponding interview passages indicated that they represented different expressions of the same underlying meaning. They remained distinct when apparently similar formulations referred to different organizational experiences, practices, or interpretations. This comparison made it possible to reduce redundancy in the initial coding while preserving distinctions that remained meaningful within the empirical material. The procedure was consistent with the compare and contrast logic described by Magnani and Gioia (2023) in the development and refinement of first-order categories.

The consolidation process resulted in 112 first-order concepts. These concepts represented a broader level of empirical categorization than the initial coding labels while remaining anchored in participants' accounts. No predetermined numerical target guided their development. Each concept was retained when it captured a substantively distinct meaning within the data, whereas conceptually overlapping observations were combined when the underlying evidence supported a common interpretation. The resulting set therefore reflected the structure emerging from comparison across the interviews rather than a predefined level of aggregation.

Particular attention was given to the formulation of the first-order concept labels. Each label was intended to express the common empirical meaning represented by the underlying material without introducing the higher level of theoretical interpretation associated with second-order analysis. Where organization-specific terminology formed an integral part

of that meaning, it was retained, including references to the Francesco Morelli Foundation, IED's Benefit Corporation status, and the founder's legacy. More general wording was used only when different formulations across interviews could be represented through a common expression without altering their substantive meaning.

For transparency, the complete analytical database preserves the connection between the original interview material, the initial coding labels, and the first-order concepts, allowing the development of each concept to be traced back to its empirical foundations.

These first-order concepts constituted the basis for the higher-order analysis described in *Section 3.4.3*. Given the size of the complete set, the Gioia Data Structure presented in Chapter 4 displays a selection of representative first-order concepts rather than reproducing all 112. The complete list of first-order concepts and their allocation to second-order themes is provided in *Appendix A. Complete Gioia Coding Structure*.

3.4.3. From First-Order Concepts to Second-Order Themes

Once the first-order analysis had been consolidated, the 112 first-order concepts were examined in relation to one another to identify broader patterns across the interview material. At this stage, the focus shifted from the meaning represented by individual concepts to the relationships among them. Concepts were compared across interviews to assess whether they reflected different manifestations of a common organizational issue or process, while distinctions were maintained when apparently related concepts captured substantively different aspects of the empirical material. This transition corresponds to the more abstract and theory-centred stage of analysis described in the Gioia Methodology, in which first-order categories are sorted, reduced, and aggregated into second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

To facilitate this comparison, conceptually related first-order concepts were temporarily brought together during the analytical process. These provisional groupings served only as a working device for examining similarities, differences, and possible relationships among concepts; they did not constitute an additional analytical level and were not included in the final Gioia Data Structure. Their composition could change when closer examination of the underlying evidence indicated that concepts initially considered similar captured different meanings, or that concepts initially treated separately reflected a common pattern.

The development of second-order themes required a higher level of interpretation than the first-order analysis. The question was no longer only what organizational actors described, but what broader organizational processes could account for the patterns observed across their accounts. At this stage, the empirical patterns emerging from the first-order concepts were considered alongside relevant theoretical knowledge. This is consistent with Magnani and Gioia (2023)'s description of second-order analysis as involving increasingly abstract categories and the combination of empirical evidence with existing theory. Theory was therefore used to support the interpretation of emerging relationships rather than to replace the empirical categories developed during the first-order analysis.

The boundaries of the emerging themes were assessed by returning to the first-order concepts and, where necessary, to the interview passages underlying them. A second-order theme was retained when the concepts associated with it could be interpreted as manifestations of a coherent higher-order pattern, while remaining sufficiently distinct from the concepts represented by other themes. Particular attention was given to cases in which a first-order concept appeared potentially relevant to more than one theme. In such instances, its placement was determined by examining the substantive meaning of the underlying empirical evidence

rather than by the similarity of its label to the wording of a particular theme.

This analytical progression resulted in *eight second-order themes*. Unlike the first-order concepts, which remained closely connected to participants' accounts, the second-order themes expressed a higher level of conceptual interpretation and captured broader patterns across the empirical material. The complete mapping between the 112 first-order concepts and their corresponding second-order themes is reported in ***Appendix A. Complete Gioia Coding Structure***. It preserves the connection between the higher-order interpretation and the empirical evidence from which it was developed. These eight themes subsequently provided the basis for the development of the aggregate dimensions described in the following section.

3.4.4. Development of Aggregate Dimensions

Following the development of the eight second-order themes, the analysis moved to the final level of abstraction represented in the Gioia Data Structure. The themes were examined in relation to one another to determine whether they captured distinct aspects of a broader organizational process and could therefore be meaningfully integrated within a common aggregate dimension. This step involved moving beyond the relationships identified within individual themes and considering the higher-order conceptual pattern formed by their combination. In the Gioia Methodology, this progression entails the aggregation of emerging categories into increasingly abstract conceptual dimensions while continuing to combine empirical evidence with theoretical interpretation (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

The development of the aggregate dimensions was guided by two complementary criteria: internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness. Second-order themes were brought together when their

relationship could be interpreted as reflecting different components of the same broader process. At the same time, the resulting dimensions had to remain sufficiently distinct from one another to represent analytically different aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. Where the boundaries between possible configurations were not immediately clear, the relationships among the themes were reconsidered in light of the first-order concepts and the underlying interview evidence. The purpose was not to obtain a predetermined arrangement, but to identify the higher-order configuration that most coherently represented the conceptual relationships emerging from the analysis, avoiding overlap between categories.

This process resulted in four aggregate dimensions, each capturing a core process through which the post-founder transformation of IED unfolded. Each dimension brought together themes that retained their individual analytical meaning while contributing to a broader conceptual process. The four dimensions therefore constituted the highest level of abstraction in the final data structure and completed the progression from the empirical first-order concepts to the higher-order analytical categories.

The mapping between the eight second-order themes and the four aggregate dimensions was retained in the analytical database as part of the complete coding structure. The final Gioia Data Structure, presented in Chapter 4, visually represents the progression from selected representative first-order concepts to the eight second-order themes and the four aggregate dimensions. At this point, the aggregate dimensions completed the categorical organization of the empirical material. The subsequent analytical step, described in *Section 3.4.5*, moved beyond this categorical structure by examining the relationships among the dimensions in the development of the conceptual model.

3.4.5. Development of the Conceptual Model

The completion of the aggregate dimensions marked the final stage in the construction of the Gioia Data Structure, but not the end of the analytical process. The subsequent stage focused on examining the relationships among the concepts developed through the analysis in order to move from a categorical representation of the empirical material towards a more dynamic explanation of the phenomenon. Gioia et al. (2013) distinguish these two analytical purposes clearly: whereas the data structure organizes first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions into a structured representation, the grounded model seeks to make the relationships among the emergent concepts explicit. Magnani and Gioia (2023) similarly describe the data structure as a relatively static representation and the model as a more dynamic depiction of the emerging explanation.

The development of the conceptual model therefore did not constitute an additional level of coding or aggregation. Instead, the four aggregate dimensions provided the conceptual basis from which their relationships could be examined. Although possible connections among concepts had already become visible during the preceding stages of analysis, they became the explicit focus at this point. Attention shifted from determining how empirical categories should be organized to considering how the principal dimensions identified through the analysis related to one another and how those relationships could contribute to an integrated account of the organizational process under investigation. This distinction is consistent with Gioia et al.'s (2013) argument that the construction of a grounded model requires attention not only to the concepts represented in the data structure but, crucially, to the relationships connecting them.

Potential relationships among the aggregate dimensions were examined against the underlying analytical structure and the empirical material from which that structure had been developed. The purpose was to assess whether the proposed connections were consistent with patterns observable across the interviews and whether they contributed to explaining the phenomenon as a process rather than simply reproducing the categorical organization already represented in the data structure. In this stage, the analysis therefore moved beyond identifying conceptual similarity towards considering connections and interdependencies among the dimensions where these relationships were supported by the empirical evidence.

This movement from the data structure to an explanatory model also involved a stronger abductive component. Magnani and Gioia (2023) explain that the development of a theoretical model proceeds through systematic combining of data and theory, providing scope for the interpretation of relationships that are not evident from categorical aggregation alone. Drawing on Gioia et al. (2013), they describe the transition from aggregate dimensions to a grounded model as potentially involving a “creative leap” enabled by deep immersion in the empirical material. Such a leap does not imply abandoning the evidence in favour of speculative theorizing. Rather, it refers to the analytical effort required to formulate a plausible explanation by considering the relationships suggested by the data together with relevant theoretical knowledge.

Following this logic, alternative ways of relating the aggregate dimensions were considered in light of both the empirical evidence and their capacity to provide a coherent explanation of the process under study. The resulting configuration was retained when the proposed relationships could be traced back to the preceding analytical levels and contributed explanatory value beyond the individual dimensions considered

separately. The objective was therefore not to reproduce the data structure in a different graphical form, but to articulate how the concepts developed through the analysis could be understood as part of a connected organizational process.

The outcome of this stage is a conceptual model grounded in the analytical structure developed from the interview material. The model is presented and interpreted in Chapter 4 together with the empirical evidence supporting its relationships.

4. Findings

4.1. Overview of the Findings

The analysis indicates that IED's transition following the founder's passing cannot be reduced to a leadership succession or a change in governance. The empirical evidence instead points to a multidimensional organizational transformation involving four interconnected processes: the redistribution of authority previously centred on the founder; the development of organizational practices and coordination mechanisms capable of sustaining activities beyond particular individuals; the selective preservation and reinterpretation of the founder's philosophy and the reconstruction of organizational identification beyond the founder. These processes did not unfold as consecutive stages. Rather, they developed in parallel and influenced one another within a post-founder governance configuration characterized by Foundation ownership and differentiated corporate, managerial, academic, and institutional responsibilities.

Following the Gioia Methodology (Magnani & Gioia, 2023), the empirical material was analysed through a progressive process of abstraction, moving from informant-centered first-order concepts to researcher-centered second-order themes and, ultimately, to four aggregate dimensions. The resulting analytical structure identifies four interconnected organizational processes: *Redistributing Organizational Authority*, *Developing Organizational Capabilities*, *Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy*, and *Reconstructing Organizational Identification*. Together, these dimensions provide an empirically grounded account of how functions that had previously converged, to different degrees, in the founder's personal authority, relationships, knowledge, and symbolic presence became increasingly sustained through differentiated organizational actors, governance bodies, practices, and networks.

Table 3 provides an analytical roadmap of the findings. Rather than reproducing the coding structure presented in the Gioia Data Structure, the table connects the principal empirical transformation identified in each area to the corresponding organizational question, second-order themes, and aggregate dimension. The table is therefore organized from the empirical transformation towards progressively higher levels of analytical abstraction.

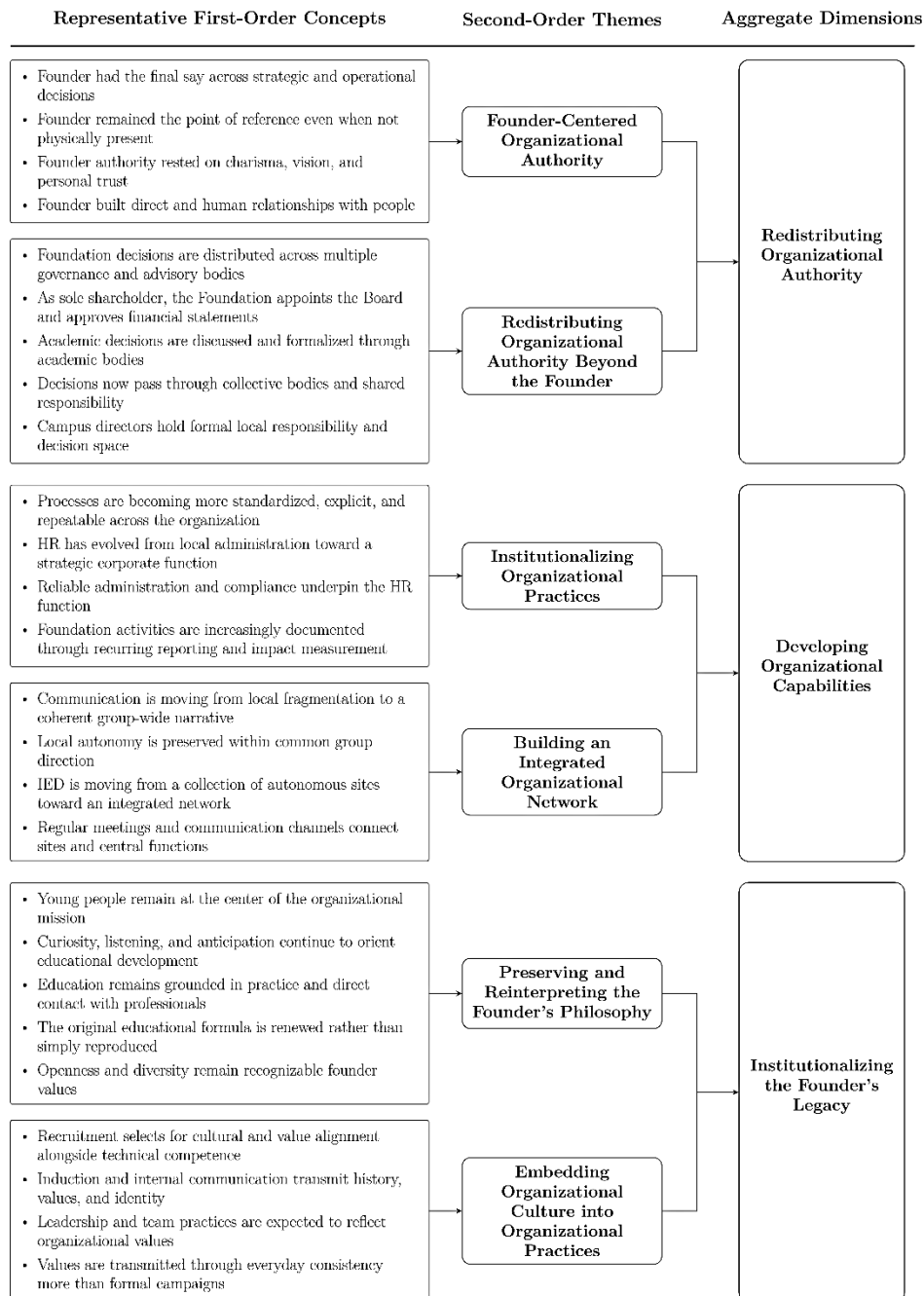
Table 3: Analytical Roadmap of the Findings. Source: Author's Elaboration

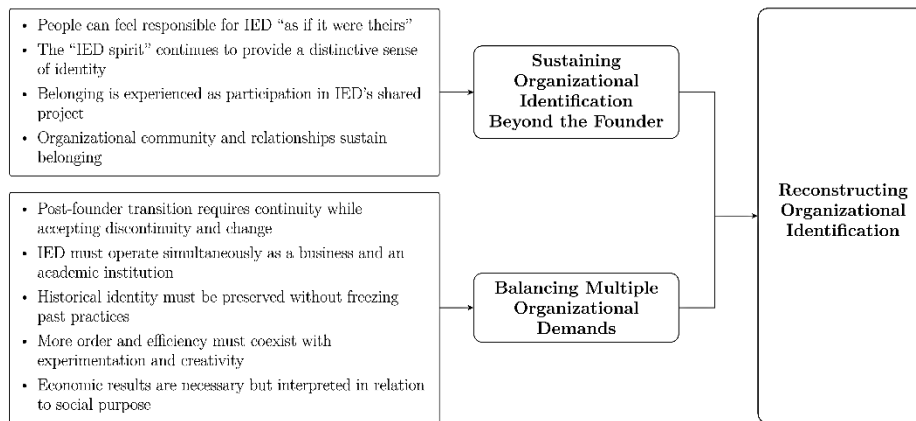
Empirical Transformation	Central Organizational Question	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimension
From founder-centered authority towards organizationally distributed authority	How can authority be exercised after the loss of the individual in whom ownership, decision-making, and organizational direction had strongly converged?	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority; Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
From person-dependent capabilities towards organizationally sustained capabilities	How can organizational activities and coordination be sustained beyond particular individuals and locally fragmented arrangements?	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices; Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
From founder-carried values and meaning towards an organizationally sustained founder legacy	How can the founder's philosophy remain relevant without depending on his personal presence?	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy; Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
From founder-mediated belonging towards organization-centered identification	How can organizational identification be sustained beyond the founder while multiple organizational demands are balanced?	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder; Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification

Figure 2 presents the final Gioia Data Structure resulting from the analysis. It illustrates the progression from selected representative informant-centered first-order concepts to eight researcher-centered second-order themes and four aggregate dimensions. The first-order concepts use concise formulations that remain closely connected to the language and meanings expressed by the interviewees, whereas the

second-order themes capture the broader organizational patterns identified through the researcher's interpretation of the empirical material. As detailed in *Section 3.4*, the complete mapping between the interview evidence, first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions is preserved in the analytical database.

Figure 2: Final Gioia Data Structure. Source: Author's Elaboration





The remainder of the chapter examines the four aggregate dimensions in depth. *Sections 4.2 to 4.5* analyse the organizational mechanisms and empirical developments associated with each dimension, while *Section 4.6* brings the findings together to identify the cross-dimensional patterns characterizing IED’s post-founder transformation. *Section 4.7* develops these patterns into an emergent conceptual model explaining how organizational functions that had previously been carried or mediated by the founder became differentiated and increasingly sustained through organizational actors, governance bodies, practices, networks, and shared narratives. The resulting model does not conceptualize organizational autonomy as separation from the founder’s historical influence. Instead, it explains how IED developed greater autonomy by reducing its dependence on the founder’s personal presence while selectively preserving and reinterpreting elements of his legacy and reconstructing organizational identity beyond him.

4.2. Redistributing Organizational Authority

The first organizational process emerging from the analysis concerns the redistribution of organizational authority following the founder's passing. Rather than replacing one leader with another, the post-founder transition required IED to reconstruct the arrangements through which strategic direction, decision-making, coordination, and organizational legitimacy

were exercised. Under Francesco Morelli's leadership, these functions had been closely concentrated in his hands through a combination of ownership, formal authority, entrepreneurial leadership, and personal influence. His passing therefore disrupted the founder-centered configuration through which organizational choices had historically been made, coordinated, and legitimized.

This need became particularly evident following the change in ownership. Morelli had exercised authority as IED's private owner, serving for most of the founder-led period as President and, during certain periods, as Chief Executive Officer. This overlap enabled him to intervene directly in both strategic and operational decisions, making authority closely associated with his personal leadership. Following his passing, ownership transferred to the Francesco Morelli Foundation, an institutional and non-profit shareholder that assumed ownership responsibilities and appointed IED's Board of Directors but could not reproduce the founder's direct involvement in everyday management. Responsibilities that had previously converged in one individual therefore had to be redistributed across differentiated institutional, managerial, academic, and campus-level roles.

Rather than dispersing authority, the transition progressively established a configuration in which the Foundation and IED's Board of Directors, Chief Executive Officer, academic governing bodies, central corporate functions, and campus directors assumed differentiated but interconnected responsibilities. Decision-making became increasingly collective and procedural, although the boundaries between Foundation ownership and IED management, and between corporate and academic governance, remained only partially proceduralized in some areas. Organizational autonomy therefore developed through a reduced

dependence on Morelli's direct personal intervention, without implying separation from the principles associated with his organizational project.

The two second-order themes examine this transformation from its two sides. *Section 4.2.1*, Founder-Centered Organizational Authority, reconstructs the configuration in which authority was closely embodied in Morelli's personal leadership. *Section 4.2.2*, Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder, examines how these functions became distributed across governance bodies, managerial roles, formal procedures, and communication mechanisms.

4.2.1. Founder-Centered Organizational Authority

Before the post-founder governance transformation, IED's organizational authority was concentrated not only in Francesco Morelli's formal positions, but also in the relationships and expectations surrounding his personal leadership. As founder, owner, President, and, during certain periods, Chief Executive Officer, he occupied several positions that would later become differentiated across distinct actors and governance bodies. Strategic direction, operational judgement, coordination, and organizational legitimacy were therefore closely connected to his presence. IED's current Code of Ethics provides documentary support for the historical basis of this centrality by tracing the creation of the school in 1966 to Morelli's vision (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a).

The concentration of decision-making authority was one of the clearest characteristics of this configuration. Formal roles and organizational structures existed, but ownership gave Morelli the capacity to intervene directly in both major strategic choices and everyday organizational matters. The organization was described as essentially belonging to one individual who could personally determine what could and should be done: "It was a company owned by one individual who, as the owner, could walk in, sit down, and say what he could do and what he

wanted to do” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). Ownership, strategic leadership, and executive authority were therefore only partially separated during the founder-led period, allowing Morelli’s extensive organizational knowledge and personal involvement to connect decisions, people, and priorities without requiring the same collective deliberation and procedural approval that characterized the later governance system.

His authority also operated through a recognizable organizational direction. His orientation was sufficiently recognizable that employees could anticipate how he would interpret a situation or assess a proposed course of action. He was described as the person who retained control over the organization’s overall direction: “*As long as Francesco Morelli was alive, he held the reins of the organization*” (M.T. Coradduzza, Vice President of Francesco Morelli Foundation). Similarly, his influence remained perceptible even when he was not directly involved in daily work: “*He was a very present figure [...] he had a very clear, very firm direction that came through very strongly*” (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group). His judgement therefore provided an implicit coordinating mechanism alongside his explicit decision-making authority.

Organizational members therefore referred to Morelli not only because he possessed the final decision-making authority, but because his judgement provided an important point of orientation. This made his leadership a coordinating mechanism in itself: the organization did not rely exclusively on written procedures or formally differentiated responsibilities because many issues could ultimately be interpreted or resolved by reference to the founder.

The same personal centrality characterized Morelli’s relationships with the campuses. IED had developed as a network of schools rooted in different cities and closely connected to their respective territories. These

local units retained considerable operational discretion, but within a configuration in which the founder remained the ultimate strategic reference: “*The founder often intervened even in highly operational matters concerning individual campuses*” (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Overall coherence therefore depended partly on Morelli’s capacity to connect otherwise differentiated units and intervene when he considered a decision relevant.

The founder’s centrality was reinforced by personal legitimacy alongside formal authority. Morelli was remembered as “*a very charismatic man [...] a visionary*” (M.T. Coradduzza, Vice President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation), whose curiosity, entrepreneurial energy, and capacity to identify emerging educational and professional opportunities strengthened his position as creator and principal interpreter of the organizational project. His judgement was treated as personally authoritative: “*Everyone asked him for advice [...] his word was gospel*” (M.T. Coradduzza, Vice President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). At the same time, his leadership remained relational: he listened to collaborators and engaged directly with people across organizational levels while retaining the authority to determine the final direction.

Formal authority and personal orientation were therefore intertwined. Morelli acted simultaneously as final decision-maker and central coordinating reference, supporting coherence across differentiated organizational activities while making the exercise of authority strongly dependent on his continued personal presence. Once his presence disappeared, the organizational challenge was not simply to fill a senior leadership position, but to redistribute the authority, responsibility, and coordination that had converged in him across a wider set of actors and governance bodies.

4.2.2. Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder

The founder's departure required IED to reconstruct authority without concentrating the organizational functions previously performed by Morelli in another individual. The post-founder transition therefore did not follow a conventional succession pattern in which a new leader assumed the founder's position. Decision-making, strategic direction, oversight, and operational responsibility were instead distributed across a governance configuration involving the Francesco Morelli Foundation as sole shareholder, IED's Board of Directors, the Chief Executive Officer, academic governance bodies, central corporate functions, and campus directors. The 2024/2025 Impact Report reflects this institutional differentiation by identifying the Foundation as the owner of the Group companies and IED S.B.p.A. as an entity under its full control with its own corporate governance bodies (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

The change in ownership was central to this redistribution. The Foundation inherited ownership of IED and acquired the prerogatives of the sole shareholder, including appointing the company's directors and approving its financial statements: *"We are the sole shareholder of these two companies [...] we appoint the directors, approve the financial statements, and appoint the Board of Statutory Auditors"* (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). IED's Code of Ethics likewise identifies the Foundation as IED's sole shareholder and describes a financial relationship in which dividends may be transferred to the Foundation after the company's operational commitments and investments have been met (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). Unlike Morelli as an individual owner, however, the Foundation could not reproduce continuous involvement in operational management. Once appointed, the chief executive retained managerial autonomy, whilst the Foundation exercised its responsibilities through the instruments available

to a shareholder. Authority therefore became differentiated among ownership, corporate governance, executive management, and academic responsibility.

The multiplication of actors made this shift particularly visible. Decisions that had previously converged on a single individual increasingly required interaction among formal roles, collective deliberation, and documented approval: *“There is a President who writes to a Board of Directors, which decides and then issues a resolution [...] there are ten people where previously there was one”* (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). IED consequently had to adapt to *“a different governance structure based on the relationship between the Board of Directors, the Chief Executive Officer, and the Foundation as shareholder”* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Within this configuration, the Foundation acts as owner and custodian of the assets and values inherited from the founder, IED’s Board of Directors has assumed corporate governance responsibilities, the Chief Executive Officer exercises managerial authority, and academic leadership retains responsibility for the educational and regulatory domains.

The coexistence of corporate and academic responsibilities made the redistribution of authority particularly complex. IED operates both as a joint-stock company and as an academic institution recognized by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. Corporate governance and executive authority are exercised through IED’s Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer, while academic authority involves the Group Academic Director and the Academic Council. IED’s Impact Report similarly describes the organization’s governance as integrating business and educational dimensions (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). This dual structure was expressed clearly: *“According to the Ministry, the*

Rector leads [...] according to the Civil Code, the Chief Executive Officer leads” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). In some cases, academic decisions consequently pass between the two domains, with academic deliberation followed by corporate ratification. Authority consequently developed through differentiated but interdependent lines rather than through a single hierarchy.

Collective deliberation became especially visible in academic governance. Decisions such as the approval of new courses to be submitted to the Ministry are prepared, discussed, and formally deliberated within the Academic Council: *“approving new courses to be submitted to the Ministry [...] involves strategic and fundamental decisions”* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). The Academic Council therefore provided an institutional space through which directors and academic coordinators can contribute to decisions affecting the future of the school. The institutional relevance of the Academic Council is also reflected in the Foundation’s Statute, which reserves one seat on the Foundation’s Board of Directors for a member appointed by IED’s Academic Council (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b). This provision creates a formal connection between the two organizations without making the Foundation one of the two components of IED’s internal corporate and academic governance.

The empirical material nevertheless indicates that this configuration remains only partially settled. Corporate and academic components do not always possess equivalent influence, some interfaces are not fully proceduralized, and the composition of the Academic Council can generate differences in participation: *“This composition can create certain imbalances”* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). The redistribution of authority therefore remains an ongoing process of

clarifying the boundaries and interactions among ownership, management, and academic authority.

The new governance configuration was accompanied by a broader differentiation of managerial responsibilities. Decision-making became organized across distinct central functions: “Decisions are divided according to the five organizational lines established by the Chief Executive Officer” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). These functions include areas such as academic direction, human resources, compliance, facilities, sales, marketing, communication, finance, control, information technology, purchasing, career services, industry engagement, and student life. They interact with campus directors, who continue to hold substantial local responsibilities. Campus directors retained responsibility for coordinating the academic, organizational, economic, and relational dimensions of their local schools, while preserving meaningful decision space within shared corporate and academic frameworks. As P. Zini emphasized, “*Campus autonomy is significant*” (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). At the Turin campus, for example, the founder’s absence created greater room for local strategies, organizational changes, facility expansion, and initiatives adapted to the surrounding context. The redistribution of authority therefore combined stronger central structures with substantial managerial autonomy at the campus level.

The separation of formally distinct bodies also required communication and decisions to become more traceable. Whereas ownership and organizational direction were previously concentrated in the founder, the Foundation now exercises its shareholder role through institutional channels connecting its governance bodies with those of IED: “*When we need to communicate something directly to the company, we write a letter to the Board of Directors*” (D. Pasotto, Executive Director,

Francesco Morelli Foundation). Formal communication forms part of a broader interface that also includes shareholder meetings, financial reporting, and exchanges between the presidents of the two boards, while informal dialogue continues to supplement these arrangements. The relevant change was therefore not the replacement of informal communication by formal communication, but the need to connect governing bodies that could no longer rely on their former personal unity.

These interfaces remain only partly codified: “*There is no fully proceduralized or formally designed governance model*” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). Coordination is also facilitated by some overlapping roles. The President of the Foundation simultaneously serves as Group Academic Director of IED, providing “*privileged access to information*” concerning the academic institution (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). At the same time, connections between the Foundation and campuses, particularly outside Milan, remain less systematic.

The redistribution of authority consequently required adaptation not only to new structures but also to new expectations about how decisions should be developed and implemented. The transition was described as “*a demanding process that required a cultural evolution within the organization*” (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Employees and managers had to become accustomed to collective bodies, differentiated competencies, formal accountability, and continuing negotiation rather than proximity to a founder with the final word.

This did not remove disagreement. Corporate and academic authority, as well as central guidance and campus autonomy, continued to require negotiation. The emerging system was described as “*not top-down, but based on discussion and negotiation*” (R. Balbo, Group Academic

Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). Once authority had been distributed, its effective exercise increasingly depended on organizational practices and coordination mechanisms capable of connecting these differentiated actors, which are examined in the following section.

4.3. Developing Organizational Capabilities

Redistributing organizational authority addressed the immediate problem created by the founder's absence, but it did not by itself ensure that IED could become less dependent on particular individuals. The post-founder transition also required systems through which knowledge, responsibilities, routines, and coordination could be sustained over time. As long as essential activities depended on personal expertise, informal relationships, or the direct intervention of specific actors, the organization remained exposed to discontinuity when those individuals changed role, left the institution, or were no longer available. Developing organizational capabilities therefore involved shifting from personal dependence towards organizationally sustained capabilities, without reducing the relevance of individual competence or replacing professional judgement with rigid procedures. Knowledge and responsibilities instead had to become more shareable, reproducible, and coordinated beyond any single actor.

This need emerged particularly clearly from the historical configuration of IED. The organization had developed through campuses strongly rooted in their local territories, functions that were not always equally structured at group level, and working arrangements that often relied on the experience and personal networks of individual actors. The founder had provided an overarching point of connection across these differentiated realities, while the campuses maintained substantial discretion in managing their local activities. Once Morelli was no longer present, the organization could not rely on his personal capacity to hold

these components together. It had to create more stable ways of preserving knowledge, coordinating activities, and maintaining coherence across the network.

The development of organizational capabilities concerned both the internal functioning of individual activities and the relationships among different parts of the institution. First, recurring organizational activities became increasingly institutionalized through strategic planning, clearer responsibilities, common platforms and indicators, group-level functions, standardized processes, and systems for managing people and organizational knowledge. These changes were not isolated technical interventions; together, they reduced the extent to which essential organizational activities depended on tacit knowledge and individual discretion. Second, IED strengthened the relationships among campuses, corporate functions, academic bodies, and the Foundation. The historical autonomy of the schools remained an important organizational resource because it allowed each campus to respond to its own educational, professional, and territorial environment. Yet this configuration had also been accompanied by fragmented practices, locally defined indicators, uneven access to information, and limited interaction across the network. Developing organizational capabilities therefore required greater integration without eliminating the distinctive characteristics of local units.

Stronger corporate functions in areas such as Human Resources, finance, communication, compliance, and data management contributed to this process by assuming responsibilities that had previously been managed more locally or through less coordinated arrangements. At the same time, campus directors retained responsibility for the academic, organizational, economic, and relational dimensions of their schools and for adapting group-level objectives to their territorial contexts. Greater

organizational autonomy therefore developed not through complete centralization, but through a more explicit division of responsibilities supported by shared systems and recurring interaction.

These arrangements also enabled knowledge to circulate more systematically across organizational boundaries. Regular meetings, shared planning processes, common performance systems, national-level labour relations, and stronger interaction among campuses created additional opportunities for local experience to contribute to broader organizational learning and for group-level priorities to be translated into campus-level practices. The transformation nevertheless remains ongoing: codification and integration vary across functions, and some interfaces continue to depend partly on informal coordination and individual initiative.

4.3.1. Institutionalizing Organizational Practices

Developing organizational capabilities required IED to make essential activities more explicit, reproducible, and accessible across roles and organizational units. Redistributing decision-making authority had created a new governance configuration, but it did not automatically transfer organizational knowledge, working methods, or operational responsibilities from individuals to the institution. The change in ownership itself reinforced this need: “*Changing the nature of the shareholder necessarily changes the way the organization works [...] which becomes much more structured, much more formal, and much more codified in terms of processes*” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation).

The degree of institutionalization nevertheless varies across organizational domains. Academic activities are supported by the Academic Council, while HR relies on a formal interface with trade-union representatives, whereas other corporate functions lack equivalent collective forums: “*There is no codified platform for the CFO [...] and*

there is no codified platform for marketing” (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). This does not mean that these functions lack responsibilities or procedures, but that interaction and deliberation are not always supported by equally stable recurring mechanisms.

Institutionalization therefore involved recurring processes, common tools, clearer responsibilities, planning mechanisms, and formal opportunities for coordination. It did not imply eliminating tacit knowledge or professional judgement, particularly in activities involving education, creative work, people management, and local relationships. Rather, systems increasingly supported the sharing and reproduction of knowledge that had previously depended more heavily on particular individuals. The introduction of multi-year planning, common indicators, the centralization of selected administrative activities, group-level functions, standardized services, recurring reporting, and clearer managerial responsibilities reflected this broader movement. The formalization of these arrangements is also reflected in IED’s Organization, Management and Control Model, which defines organizational responsibilities, control protocols, information flows, and periodic monitoring mechanisms (Istituto Europeo di Design S.p.A., 2019).

The development of the Human Resources function provided one of the clearest examples of this change. Although HR already existed during the founder-led period, it had been concentrated primarily on administrative and compliance-related activities, while recruitment was often managed locally through campus or personal networks. The subsequent development of a corporate HR function progressively extended its responsibilities to workforce planning, organizational design,

talent development, performance management, succession planning, and cultural alignment.

The first integrated People Strategy, introduced in 2022, connected these activities to IED's wider strategic planning. Rather than treating HR initiatives as separate interventions, the function began to formulate its own multi-year plan in relation to the company's overall direction: *"To present a function-specific strategy that aligns with and incorporates the company's overall strategy"* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). This allowed corporate priorities to be translated into workforce requirements, future skills, development programmes, and organizational responsibilities.

Strategic repositioning did not reduce the importance of operational reliability. Activities such as payroll, labour-cost control, contractual compliance, employee data management, and relations with external collaborators remained essential: *"Payslips have to be issued every month [...] that cannot be taken for granted"* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). Platforms, data systems, standardized responsibilities, and recurring planning cycles helped make these routine processes less dependent on individual memory, connecting long-term strategic development with the dependable reproduction of everyday activities.

The same process was visible in the management of competencies and critical roles. The introduction of performance and potential assessment, training plans, succession analysis, and the identification of roles that could not remain vacant represented an effort to reduce organizational exposure to the loss of individual employees. The intended outcome was a form of organizational resilience that did not depend on the uninterrupted availability or performance of a small number of individuals: *"We need to create an organization that does not collapse [...] if one, two, or three people [...] are unable to perform as usual"* (P. Vio

Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). The focus therefore shifted from replacing individuals after departure to anticipating which capabilities were critical, where they were located, and how they could be developed internally. Succession planning became part of a broader effort to ensure that knowledge and responsibility remained available to the organization over time. These developments are also reflected in IED's 2024/2025 Impact Report, which documents the implementation of a three-year training plan, the design of the Performance-Potential model, investments in internal mobility and employee training, and the use of digital systems to organize and share professional information (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

The broader three-year corporate plan reinforces the same orientation by providing a shared horizon through which functions and campuses can identify future priorities, required competencies, resource needs, and organizational risks. Within HR, for example, recruitment planning began to incorporate the expected evolution of campuses, student numbers, course portfolios, turnover, and professional families, reducing reliance on isolated or reactive hiring decisions.

The formalization of employee relations provided another example of this transition. Historically, the autonomy of the campuses had been accompanied by locally differentiated relations with trade unions, depending on territorial representation and the practices of individual units. The new supplementary company agreement introduced national-level information and negotiation mechanisms while retaining territorial moments for campus-specific issues. Topics such as performance-related pay, flexibility, smart working, workforce composition, and technological change could therefore be addressed through a more integrated framework. This arrangement transformed labour relations from a

collection of largely local practices into a recurring organizational process combining central coordination and local information.

Institutionalization also affected the educational offer. The reduction and reorganization of a very large catalogue of courses was not described as a simple closure of programmes. Courses were rewritten and aligned so that the same qualification could be offered across different campuses while retaining adaptations required by local contexts. Formalization therefore created common frameworks within which differentiated implementation remained possible.

At campus level, formalization translated into the redesign of everyday services. The creation of a single service point for students at the Turin campus replaced a fragmented configuration in which administrative, academic, and reception-related questions were handled by multiple offices, whose respective functions were not always clear to students. The reorganization changed physical spaces, staff positions, and working methods while making responsibilities more recognizable and accessible: *“We created a one-stop service desk for students”* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). A service that had previously required students to know which office or individual to contact was thus reorganized around a more standardized point of access.

The change also illustrated how institutionalization developed over time rather than simply through the introduction of a new procedure. Changes to workspaces, role boundaries, and routines initially generated disruption, but gradually became incorporated into everyday work. Employee participation consequently became an important component of this process: formal systems could define responsibilities, but their stability depended on people being able to *“Embrace new developments and changes and take an active part in them”* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). This participatory dimension was especially important

because IED's activities could not be governed entirely through standardized prescriptions. Because campuses differed in size, educational portfolios, territorial relationships, and organizational needs, common processes also continued to require local interpretation. Institutionalization therefore provided a shared organizational basis for discretion rather than eliminating it.

Recurring accountability mechanisms provided another form of institutionalization. The Foundation's decision to prepare a Mission Report despite having no legal obligation to do so created a recurring process for documenting activities, resources, partnerships, costs, outcomes, mission, and values: "*This is our first Mission Report [...] a document we were not required to produce, but one we chose to prepare [...] From now on, we will produce it every year*" (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). The report simultaneously made the Foundation's activities more visible, provided the IED community with a clearer account of how resources were used, and required the Foundation itself to organize information about its projects in a consistent form.

These reporting practices also support organizational learning. Measuring outcomes, documenting costs, and comparing activities across years generate information for subsequent planning, while the Foundation's interest in common impact-assessment frameworks with other European foundations extends this learning beyond the individual organization. Institutionalization nevertheless remains uneven. Some processes have become recurrent and structured, while other functions still lack equivalent coordination platforms, and systems such as employee potential assessment are still being introduced.

4.3.2. Building an Integrated Organizational Network

Developing organizational capabilities required IED not only to institutionalize individual activities, but also to strengthen the relationships connecting campuses, central functions, governance bodies, and the Foundation. Historically, IED had developed as a network of schools strongly rooted in their territories and endowed with substantial local autonomy. This allowed campuses to respond closely to their educational, professional, and cultural environments, but was also associated with fragmented practices and uneven coordination. After the founder's departure, the challenge was therefore to create a more connected organizational network without eliminating local responsiveness.

Integration did not imply applying identical arrangements across campuses. The interviews repeatedly show that IED's locations differed considerably in size, educational portfolio, organizational complexity, and territorial relationships, making unadapted solutions potentially inappropriate: *"A decision designed for one context can produce less appropriate effects in another"* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Local responsiveness remained necessary because organizational initiatives had to be interpreted in relation to the city and its specific context: *"Adapting it [...] to the city in which the campus operated [...] for the benefit of that city"* (M.T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Common frameworks provided overall direction, while campus directors retained responsibility for translating shared objectives, data, systems, and specialist support into decisions appropriate to their local conditions.

More uniform organizational systems nevertheless made it possible to develop a broader view of IED as a whole. In the earlier configuration, campuses had managed many activities with substantial autonomy, and

information was not always organized in a way that allowed direct comparison across units. Greater standardization, particularly in finance, data management, HR, and selected administrative processes improved comparability across units and gave central management a clearer understanding of overall organizational functioning. This development was captured in the observation that “*Today, thanks to a more uniform system, it is possible to have an overall view of the organization*” (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). This common perspective did not remove local decision-making. Shared indicators and processes made differences more visible and comparable, while locally exercised judgement and dialogue remained necessary to adapt them to specific contexts and prevent standardized arrangements from generating inappropriate consequences in local level.

Communication between campuses and central functions also became more frequent and systematic. Before the widespread adoption of remote working technologies, interaction across geographically dispersed units was slower and often required physical travel. The pandemic accelerated the use of online meetings and created more continuous contact between campus directors, corporate functions, and other locations. The networked structure of IED subsequently came to rely on regular calls, functional meetings, and recurring opportunities for strategic discussion. The 2023/2024 Impact Report records a plenary meeting involving staff from the Italian, Spanish, and Brazilian campuses and monthly or bimonthly alignment meetings between top management and the first line of group and campus functions, confirming that cross-site communication has become a recurring organizational arrangement (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b).

The degree of coordination still varies across functions. At the Turin campus, HR operates through a fixed weekly meeting combining

strategic discussion and problem-solving, while communication with the Academic Directorate remained continuously open. Other areas, including marketing and communication, are described as less systematically coordinated. Integration is therefore more established in some relationships, while continuing to depend more heavily on specific needs or individual initiative in others.

Greater interaction also contributed to a more shared institutional narrative across the network. IED's history, its educational model, relationship with the Foundation, and Benefit Corporation status increasingly became part of a group-level account rather than separate stories communicated independently by each location. The change was reflected in the observation that *"Now all campus directors and central functions carry forward a single narrative"* (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group). This did not require uniform local communication, since corporate messages can be transmitted across the organization and subsequently adapted to local media, projects, and territorial relationships.

The relationship among international campuses likewise became more active. Although IED has long operated in Italy, Spain, and Brazil, geographical presence alone does not necessarily constitute an integrated network, as documented across the three Impact Reports (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2024; 2025b; 2026). More recent initiatives have strengthened exchanges among existing campuses, making the network a tangible source of value for students and staff. The Turin campus has gradually strengthened collaboration with Barcelona and subsequently developed more stable exchanges with Bilbao, followed by projects involving Madrid and Brazil. These collaborations included student exchanges, shared projects, and opportunities to circulate knowledge and educational experiences across locations. Internationalization therefore

increasingly concerned activating relationships among existing locations rather than geographical expansion alone.

Integration also involved the relationship between IED and the Francesco Morelli Foundation. The Foundation interacts with different organizational interlocutors depending on the matter concerned, including communication functions for press-related issues, the Academic Directorate for educational matters, and campus directors for locally based initiatives. Links with campuses outside Milan, however, remain more difficult to sustain continuously. The proposed creation of Foundation ambassadors aims to make these relationships more stable and bidirectional. The envisaged role would not simply involve communicating Foundation initiatives from the centre to local schools; it would also involve collecting information on territorial opportunities, projects, calls, and needs and transmitting it back to the Foundation. The initiative was described as a mechanism still under development: “*This could become an ambassador project [...] I believe we will structure it soon*” (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation).

At the time of the interviews, this mechanism had not yet been fully implemented. Formal and informal forms of coordination therefore continued to coexist: the Foundation interacted with IED through letters to the Board of Directors, shareholder meetings, and other institutional channels, while operational collaboration developed through meetings, project-specific discussions, and brainstorming. The intention to establish fixed institutional moments linked to budget approval and the annual Mission Report represented a further attempt to make these interactions more regular.

Physical proximity was also described as a potential mechanism for strengthening integration. The new Milan Campus is a project designed to bring together activities that are currently dispersed across multiple

locations in the city. The material scope of this consolidation is confirmed by the 2026 press release on *The Glitch Camp*, which states that five Milan locations will be brought together at the Ex Macello site², expanding IED's space from 18,000 to 39,000 square metres and combining education, events, and research (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Beyond this infrastructural consolidation, bringing people together in a shared physical space is expected to facilitate interaction, reciprocal knowledge, and opportunities for collaboration, thereby potentially strengthening organizational integration: "*Bringing everyone together in one place [...] can help people [...] get to know one another better*" (M.T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation).

At the same time, the Milan Campus raises questions about the balance between organizational centrality and the vitality of the wider network. It can become a centre capable of generating knowledge, innovation, and opportunities for the other campuses: "*A kind of catalyst [...] spreading competencies, innovation, and opportunities across all campuses*" and "*a hub capable of feeding and strengthening the entire system*" (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Yet the same project may also concentrate attention and resources in Milan at the expense of other locations. Its integrative value therefore depends on its ability to circulate resources across the network rather than functioning as an isolated or dominant centre.

Organizational integration further extended to the Foundation's external relationships with public institutions, third-sector organizations, companies, sponsors, and other foundations. These partnerships provided financial resources, specialist expertise, visibility, and access to communities outside the immediate IED environment. This role is

² The Ex Macello is a former industrial site in Milan's Porta Vittoria area, currently undergoing redevelopment as part of the ARIA urban regeneration project and designated to host the new IED Milan Campus (Fondazione Francesco Morelli & Istituto Europeo di Design, 2026).

formally supported by the Foundation's Statute, which authorizes it to connect IED with social and cultural institutions internationally and to develop agreements with public and private organizations (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b).

The developing European network of universities and university foundations illustrates how these external relationships could also expand organizational knowledge: *"I am also developing a more international strand: a network of European universities and university foundations focused on supporting talent"* (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Participation in this network was not pursued only to increase institutional visibility. It allowed participants to compare experiences, exchange practices, explore joint initiatives, and develop shared responses to common challenges rather than addressing them independently. The development of institutional partnerships therefore supported not only external positioning, but also access to knowledge that was not readily available within a single organization.

The measurement of social impact provides a concrete illustration. Participating foundations considered pooling consultants, methodologies, and costs to develop a common assessment framework rather than commissioning separate approaches. External integration could therefore support both access to resources and the joint development of knowledge subsequently applicable within individual organizations. These relationships complemented internal integration by extending the network through which IED and the Foundation can mobilize competencies and opportunities beyond organizational boundaries. Internally, campuses can contribute local expertise and educational projects to the wider institution. Externally, the Foundation and IED can connect those capabilities with partners operating in public, private, and international contexts.

However, IED has not yet become a fully integrated system. Coordination still varies across functions, the Foundation's relationship with non-Milan campuses remains under development, and common arrangements continue to require adaptation across heterogeneous contexts. Integration therefore remains dependent on continuing interaction, adaptation, and negotiation.

4.4. Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy

Developing organizational capabilities beyond the founder did not lead IED to separate itself from the principles associated with Francesco Morelli. The post-founder transition instead required the organization to preserve the elements of his vision considered central to its identity while no longer depending on him as their personal interpreter and carrier. Authority, coordination, and organizational practices could be redistributed or formalized, but the founder's educational purpose, social orientation, and understanding of the organizational project also had to remain recognizable as IED continued to evolve.

Preserving this legacy extended beyond the commemoration of the founder. Morelli's influence was associated with principles that continued to orient the institution: attention to young people, practical and professionally grounded education, openness to emerging social and occupational needs, accessibility, responsibility towards society, and the conviction that design and project culture should produce concrete usefulness. His own retrospective account places young people, preparation for work and citizenship, innovation, and usefulness to society at the centre of the school he sought to create (IED Rio, 2023). The Foundation's Statute and Ethical Code similarly connect project culture with professional education, support for young talent, inclusion, innovation, and socially useful initiatives (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b).

Legacy preservation, however, did not imply reproducing unchanged the organization developed during Morelli's lifetime. His leadership reflected a configuration in which ownership, authority, and organizational direction were concentrated in one person. Preserving his legacy therefore required a distinction between the principles considered essential to IED and the personal and organizational arrangements through which he had originally enacted them. This distinction allowed more formal governance, stronger managerial functions, a reorganized educational offer, new services, and broader social commitments to coexist with continuity in the institution's underlying educational and social orientation.

The Francesco Morelli Foundation has assumed a particularly important role within this process. The transfer of ownership placed IED under the ownership of a non-profit Foundation (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a), while the Foundation has also assumed responsibility for safeguarding the ethical and cultural orientation associated with the founder's project. Its Ethical Code explicitly defines the Foundation as guarantor of integrity, sustainability, and responsibility in the management and development of IED and commits it to preserving and developing the founder's project over time (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a). Rather than reproducing Morelli's direct managerial authority, the Foundation provides an institutional framework through which his legacy can be preserved and reinterpreted beyond his personal presence.

This process also extends beyond the Foundation. The founder's principles continue to be carried forward through the educational model, organizational communication, recruitment and people-management practices, social initiatives, and the Benefit Corporation framework. The institutionalization of the founder's legacy nevertheless remains an

ongoing process, particularly as organizational members who knew Morelli directly are gradually replaced by people who encounter him primarily through institutional narratives, values, and practices. Preserving continuity therefore requires deliberate interpretation, transmission, and adaptation rather than assuming that the historical and cultural core of IED will reproduce itself automatically.

4.4.1. Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy

The institutionalization of Francesco Morelli's legacy began with the preservation of the principles through which he had interpreted IED's educational purpose and development. Across the interviews, his legacy emerged not simply as the memory of the founder, but as an enduring orientation that continued to shape how IED understood its mission, evaluated opportunities, and defined its educational and social contribution.

This orientation was closely connected to Morelli's curiosity and attention to people and the surrounding environment. His decision-making was informed by an interest in how others thought, emerging professional possibilities, and changing social needs: *"He was interested in understanding how other people thought"* (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). He was similarly described as *"very receptive [...] both to society's needs and to the possibilities emerging from professionals"* and as someone who *"would explore other possibilities for new courses [...] it was as though he had sensors"* (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). The founder's legacy therefore included a way of approaching organizational development through the observation of external change and its translation into educational opportunities.

This orientation was reflected in IED's educational model. Morelli developed courses in areas that could offer concrete professional

opportunities and maintained close contact with professional practice by bringing practitioners into the classroom. Students were therefore expected not only to acquire theoretical knowledge, but to learn through direct engagement with those operating in the relevant professions. This remained one of the most recognizable elements of IED after his departure through the continuing use of professionals as lecturers, relationships with companies and institutions, and project-based learning. The Impact Reports and IED's Ethical Code document the continuity of an educational approach combining theory, practical knowledge, project work, and engagement with professionals and companies (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2024; 2025a; 2025b; 2026).

Young people constituted another central reference in Morelli's philosophy. IED was described as a project intended to give them practical tools to develop a profession, assume responsibility for their choices, and build greater control over their lives. Interviewees connected this orientation to Morelli's own biography and experience of mobility and professional development, while his account of IED's foundation and the Foundation's formal mission similarly place young people, preparation for work, and participation in society at the centre of the educational project (IED Rio, 2023; Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; 2023b). Innovation was consequently valued not simply for novelty, but for its capacity to create meaningful opportunities. The founder's objective was described as the search for: "*An interesting, new formula that would genuinely help young people*" (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation).

Usefulness also extended beyond employability. Morelli's educational vision connected professional development to civic and social responsibility, with design understood as a means of responding to concrete needs and generating positive effects for individuals and

communities. This relationship among project culture, education, social usefulness, and the common good is also formalized in the ethical codes and Benefit purposes of the Foundation and IED (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). This emphasis is visible in the criteria used to evaluate contemporary initiatives. Projects are expected to respond to real problems rather than merely display creative capability. The underlying intention is captured in the “*desire [...] to present a project that was genuinely useful*” (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group).

The Glitch Camp provides a particularly clear illustration of this continuity. Rather than limiting IED’s participation in the Milan Design Week to a conventional exhibition, the organization responded to the difficulty faced by students seeking affordable accommodation by creating a free campsite. The project combined design and social usefulness by making the Milan Design Week and its cultural network more accessible to an international student population (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b; Fondazione Francesco Morelli & Istituto Europeo di Design, 2026). The project’s recognition with the 2026 Compasso d’Oro in the Design for Social category further highlights the social orientation of the initiative (ADI - Associazione per il Disegno Industriale, 2026). Rather than reproducing an initiative created by Morelli, the project applied a recognizable founding principle to a contemporary social need.

The Foundation’s activities similarly extended these principles to contemporary contexts. Scholarships, support for thesis projects, initiatives directed towards vulnerable groups, and other social programmes preserved the centrality of education and project culture while applying them beyond IED’s conventional student population. These initiatives were not presented as commemorative activities dedicated to Morelli, but as contemporary translations of opportunity,

inclusion, practical learning, and personal development. The Foundation's Ethical Code identifies access to knowledge, scholarships, support for young entrepreneurship, and socially useful projects as instruments of its mission, while the Francesco Morelli Grant combines financial assistance, training, and mentorship with intended social impact (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; 2026).

Accessibility and openness constituted further elements of this philosophy. Morelli was remembered as willing to support students who could not afford tuition when they demonstrated commitment and determination, an orientation continued through scholarships and financial-support mechanisms documented in the Impact Reports and the Foundation's formal objectives (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b; 2026; Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a). Current scholarships and financial support mechanisms continue this concern by creating access to educational and development opportunities for talented students who might otherwise remain excluded. The openness associated with IED was not limited to financial circumstances but also extended to social, cultural, personal, and educational diversity. The organization was described as historically willing to welcome people from different backgrounds, with classroom heterogeneity regarded as demanding but also as a source of cultural richness. This orientation was attributed directly to the founder's imprint and remains recognizable in contemporary commitments to inclusion, international openness, equal opportunities, and respect for difference (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a; 2026).

Internationalization also formed part of the founder's original understanding of growth. Under Morelli, it was pursued primarily through the establishment of campuses in Italy and abroad. The international orientation of the organization was therefore not introduced by the post-founder governance. What changed was the way this orientation is

enacted. Whereas earlier internationalization was associated primarily with geographical expansion, it now also takes the form of student exchanges, international partnerships, double degrees, joint programmes, online education, and collaboration among existing campuses, as documented in the Impact Reports (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2024; 2025b; 2026). The continuity therefore lies in international openness rather than in the preservation of a single organizational mechanism.

The same pattern was visible in the educational model. The continued involvement of professionals in teaching has preserved the founder's practical orientation, while also requiring greater attention to lecturers' pedagogical capabilities and the evolving learning needs of contemporary students. The need for reinterpretation was particularly visible in the evolution from "doing" and "knowing how to do" towards the inclusion of "knowing how to be". The original model emphasized practical competence and professional readiness. The current interpretation added a stronger focus on personal awareness, relational ability, and human development. This addition was not presented as a rejection of the founding model, but as an effort to preserve its relevance for students facing different social and educational conditions.

The Foundation plays a central institutional role in maintaining the founder's philosophy as a reference for the organization. Its role is not to manage IED directly or to reproduce Morelli's personal authority, but to protect the assets inherited from him and safeguard the cultural, ethical, and social orientation associated with the institutional project. IED retains managerial autonomy, while the Foundation exercises custodial and ethical responsibilities aimed at preserving the coherence and continuing development of the IED project. This role is explicitly formalized in the Foundation's Ethical Code and Statute, which connect the protection of its

assets with the preservation and development of the founder's project over time (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; 2023b).

The founder's decision to leave IED to the Foundation also became part of the legacy itself. Although Morelli's precise motivations were not communicated explicitly and cannot be established with certainty, the arrangement placed the organization under the ownership of a collective non-profit entity and protected it from dispersion. Interviewees interpreted this as consistent with a concern for IED's long-term continuity, while IED's Ethical Code confirms that Morelli made the Foundation his universal heir and linked the companies he left to the pursuit of its social objectives (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). The enduring imperative was expressed as "to keep IED alive": preserving the institution, enabling its development, and maintaining its educational purpose over time.

At the same time, preserving Morelli's philosophy required distinguishing it from the entirety of his managerial model. His leadership reflected the historical conditions of an owner-entrepreneur described as "*An Italian entrepreneur shaped by the 1960s [...] with a particular mindset*" (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). The model had supported IED's creation and expansion but was not considered fully reproducible within a more complex, international, regulated, and collectively governed institution.

Preserving the founder's philosophy therefore required selection and interpretation, distinguishing the elements that represented the enduring core of IED from those more specifically associated with the founder-led configuration. Attention to young people, learning through practice, openness, innovation, international orientation, responsibility towards society, and the usefulness of design were treated as enduring principles. Direct personal control, informal coordination, and the overlap

between ownership and executive leadership were instead associated more specifically with the founder-centered configuration and replaced by more formal governance and managerial systems. The relationship between continuity and adaptation was summarized as the need to “*Balance continuity in values with managerial governance and efficiency*” (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). This balance did not imply choosing between the founder’s values and contemporary management, but ensuring that organizational development remained consistent with the institution’s purpose while adopting arrangements capable of supporting its current scale, regulatory responsibilities, and operational complexity.

The continuing work on mission and values reflects the same interpretive process. Both IED and the Foundation continue to translate broad historical and statutory principles into priorities that remain meaningful under changing external conditions, rather than treating the founder’s legacy as a fixed set of past decisions. This interpretive work has become increasingly necessary as the number of organizational members with direct experience of Morelli has gradually declined. New employees and students increasingly encounter the founder through institutional history, mission, narratives, and practices rather than through personal testimony. Consequently, the continuity of his philosophy can no longer depend primarily on direct personal memory; it has had to become sufficiently explicit and recognizable to orient people who never met him.

4.4.2. Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices

Preserving Francesco Morelli’s legacy required the principles associated with his vision to become recognizable in the everyday functioning of IED. As direct personal experience of the founder has gradually declined, cultural continuity has increasingly depended on organizational mechanisms through which history, values, and purpose can be

communicated, interpreted, and enacted. It can therefore no longer rely primarily on personal contact with Morelli or on the informal transmission of memories by long-standing collaborators. These mechanisms include organizational communication and induction, recruitment and people-management practices, formal institutional arrangements, and educational and Foundation initiatives. The founder's legacy is therefore reproduced not through a single dedicated programme, but through a combination of narratives, selection criteria, structures, and recurring practices.

Communication represents one of the most visible mechanisms of cultural transmission. IED's institutional narrative continues to refer to its foundation in 1966, Morelli's original project, the educational model he developed, and the social purpose associated with design. The prominence of these elements varies according to audience, with institutional materials and press relations providing more extensive historical accounts than communications directed towards prospective students. Nevertheless, organizational history remains recurrent across websites, social media, fairs, commercial materials, and press relations.

Following the transfer of ownership, this narrative has become increasingly mediated by the Francesco Morelli Foundation. During Morelli's lifetime, communication could refer directly to the founder-owner; subsequently, the Foundation has provided a more institutional representation of the organization's origins, mission, and social orientation. This transition developed progressively. In the first phase following Morelli's passing, the Foundation was communicated primarily as IED's new owner, while the relationship between the two institutional narratives had not yet been fully defined. Over time, IED and the Foundation have clarified how to communicate their connection, which projects to present jointly, and how to preserve their distinct organizational roles. The Foundation's own website, social-media presence,

communication professionals, and institutional narrative have further supported this development.

Group-level communication has reinforced this process. IED had historically relied more heavily on communication functions associated with individual campuses, whereas the development of a national and subsequently group-level Press Office increased coherence across locations. Central communication now coordinates with local offices and differentiated organizational actors according to content, including the Academic Directorate for academic matters: “*We essentially develop [...] the more academic communication [...] with the Academic Directorate*” (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group). This allows the founder’s legacy to be connected to current academic content, strategic developments, local initiatives, and projects rather than reproduced as a fixed historical narrative.

Internal communication and induction perform a related function. Compared with the earlier configuration, in which IED’s history could be perceived as more distant from campuses outside Milan, the organization now develops a more shared group-level account of its origins and identity. New employees are introduced to IED’s origins, institutional characteristics, and contemporary structure, while campus directors and central functions contribute to carrying this shared narrative across locations. Documentary evidence also shows that onboarding transmits formal organizational expectations, with MOG 231³ training made compulsory for new employees during 2024/2025 (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

³ The MOG 231 (Model of Organization, Management and Control) is the organizational compliance model adopted by IED pursuant to Italian Legislative Decree No. 231/2001. It establishes responsibilities, controls, information flows, and training requirements aimed at preventing offences that may give rise to corporate administrative liability (Istituto Europeo di Design S.p.A., 2019).

The internal communication project under development seeks to reinforce this shared understanding by clarifying “*what kind of company you work in, what the shared objectives are, and what IED wants to do for its people*” (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group). In this sense, internal communication does more than recall the founder’s history; it connects IED’s historical identity to current organizational priorities and to employees’ relationship with the wider institutional project. At the same time, interviewees emphasized that cultural transmission cannot depend exclusively on formal communication. Values are also conveyed through organizational activities, everyday interactions, induction, and the projects IED chooses to pursue. Because these values are described as strongly perceived but not always explicitly articulated, the challenge is less to create a new cultural identity than to make existing values more recognizable and transmissible across a larger organization. The internal *brand-awareness* work supports this effort by providing communication functions with a common basis for expressing them across different channels.

People-management practices represent a second mechanism of cultural transmission. Recruitment is not described solely as an assessment of technical competence, but also as an evaluation of whether candidates’ motivations and working orientations are compatible with IED’s cultural and institutional characteristics. Selection thus constitutes one of the points at which values that can no longer be transmitted directly by the founder are incorporated into organizational membership. The IED Code of Ethics complements this practice by formalizing principles of merit, professional competence, objective evaluation, and equal opportunity (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a).

The fit sought by the organization is linked explicitly to the Foundation and the Benefit Corporation model: “*We have to align*

ourselves with the value profile established by the Foundation and by being a Benefit Corporation” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). Candidates are expected not only to possess the required technical abilities, but also to “*embrace the organizational culture, the values embodied by the Foundation, and the company’s benefit purposes*” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED).

Motivation is therefore part of the assessment: “*It is necessary to assess [...] what motivates them to work: why do you work?*” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). Cultural fit, openness to diversity, collaborative orientation, resilience, and capacity to contribute to shared projects are considered alongside technical expertise, while excessively directive leadership styles are viewed as less compatible with an organization requiring participation and cross-functional collaboration. These expectations vary by role and do not imply a standardized personality profile, but they establish a cultural boundary: professional competence alone is insufficient when motivations or working styles conflict with IED’s institutional purposes.

The same values are enacted through everyday relational practices. Respectful interaction, openness to difference, team participation, and the sharing of expertise are described as recognizable elements of IED’s working culture, consistent with the principles of responsibility, inclusion, dialogue, and respect formalized in the ethical codes of the Foundation and IED (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). Project culture is particularly important in this respect because it is not understood solely as an educational method or technical competence, but also as a way of organizing collective work. It extends the founder’s emphasis on “doing” and “knowing how to do” into a form of collaboration in which different competencies contribute to shared outcomes.

Formal institutional arrangements further embed these principles. Foundation ownership and IED's Benefit Corporation status make the relationship between economic activity and social purpose more explicit. IED remains responsible for financial equilibrium, educational quality, employees and collaborators, and organizational investment, while profitability also contributes to preserving the institution and supporting projects consistent with the Foundation's mission. The Benefit Corporation framework therefore connects economic resources to a wider institutional purpose rather than displacing the importance of business performance, with common-benefit purposes formally operating alongside profit objectives (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

This relationship also gives broader meaning to everyday organizational performance. Revenues and margins generated by IED contribute to sustaining educational activities and initiatives for students, territories, and vulnerable groups. IED's Code of Ethics formalizes this circular relationship by indicating that distributable margins may be transferred to the Foundation and returned to the community through its statutory activities (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a).

The ethical codes of the Foundation and IED provide an additional formal mechanism of transmission. The Foundation's code establishes principles intended to orient its controlled organizations, while IED's code derives its values and general rules of conduct from that framework (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). The MOG 231 complements these principles through formal responsibilities, controls, information flows, and training requirements (Istituto Europeo di Design S.p.A., 2019). Together, these arrangements provide a value-oriented institutional framework without placing IED's daily operations under the Foundation's direct management.

The founder's principles are also embedded in decisions concerning students and educational access. IED's openness involves welcoming students from different social, cultural, and personal backgrounds, with the resulting heterogeneity regarded both as an educational challenge and a source of cultural richness. Equal access, non-discrimination, and recognition of differences are also formalized in the ethical codes of IED and the Foundation (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). This orientation is explicitly connected to the founder: *"It is a characteristic that derives directly from the founder's vision"* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin).

Accessibility becomes concrete through scholarships, financial support, mobility opportunities, and Foundation programmes: "We also pay close attention to accessibility and inclusion [...] by supporting talent financially as well" (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). The Impact Reports document merit- and income-based scholarships as recurring mechanisms for widening access (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Some initiatives also connect support with civic responsibility. Designers in Action, for example, combines financial assistance with participation in volunteer activities, linking educational opportunity to social contribution.

Foundation projects extend these principles beyond the traditional student population. Initiatives involving people in prison, young people under judicial restrictions, and communities with limited access to design education apply project culture to confidence, organization, and personal development. The 2023/2024 Impact Report, for example, documents educational and creative workshops with detainees at Regina Coeli (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b). These projects translate

practical learning and social usefulness into contexts substantially different from IED's conventional educational environment.

Project selection itself is guided by recurring criteria of sustainability, inclusion, innovation, usefulness, and social impact. Sustainability is understood broadly, encompassing environmental, social, human, and process-related dimensions rather than environmental considerations alone. The Francesco Morelli Grant illustrates how these criteria are formalized: under the 2026 regulations, applications are evaluated according to project quality and social relevance, development potential, and applicants' motivation and commitment, with selected participants receiving training, mentorship, and potentially financial support for implementation (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2026). The mechanism therefore connects student creativity to practical development and intended social impact.

International openness is likewise enacted through projects, mobility programmes, and participation across different IED campuses and cultural backgrounds: "The international dimension conveyed by the students who participate in our projects is also of great value" (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). IED's latest Impact Report similarly describes cultural plurality and cross-national collaboration as components of its educational model (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

This international orientation continues to coexist with a recognizable Italian and European cultural positioning. IED remains connected to Italian design, creativity, craftsmanship, cinema, fashion, and product culture, having "*maintained a very strong Made in Italy identity*" (E. Ronsisvalle, Press Office Manager, IED Group). This cultural reference does not oppose internationalization but provides a historical basis from which international education and collaboration can develop.

The empirical material nevertheless presents cultural embedding as an incomplete and continuing organizational effort. Communication between the Foundation and IED still requires further development, the explicit articulation of organizational values remains uneven across campuses, and organizational members do not all engage with the institution's history to the same degree. The mechanisms described above create more stable opportunities for cultural transmission, but their effectiveness continues to depend on how organizational members interpret and enact them in practice.

4.5. Reconstructing Organizational Identification

The organizational transformations discussed in the previous sections also affected the basis of organizational identification. As authority became distributed, organizational practices more formalized, and the founder's values increasingly translated into institutional arrangements, employees described their attachment less through Morelli's personal presence and increasingly through IED itself, its educational mission, shared values, and collective purpose. Documentary sources primarily articulate the content of IED's organizational identity, while the interviews show how organizational members relate to that identity and experience belonging (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a; 2026). The founder continues to represent an important symbolic reference, but organizational identification has increasingly become anchored in an organizational project capable of extending beyond his personal presence.

This aggregate dimension develops through two complementary themes. *Section 4.5.1* examines how belonging has become increasingly anchored in IED as a shared organizational project rather than in personal proximity to the founder. *Section 4.5.2* addresses the organizational identity with which members identify, examining how IED maintains a

recognizable purpose while accommodating managerial, academic, economic, social, and historical demands.

4.5.1. Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder

The reconstruction of organizational identification involved a gradual change in the reference around which belonging was experienced. During the founder-led period, Morelli was closely connected not only to organizational authority but also to the emotional and relational life of IED. His ability to involve collaborators and generate enthusiasm around projects contributed to a form of belonging in which the founder and the organization were difficult to separate. After his departure, belonging could no longer depend on direct interaction with him and has increasingly been sustained through IED itself: its projects, values, educational purpose, relationships, and organizational community. Documentary sources corroborate the continuity of these referents by connecting IED's current mission and values to Morelli's educational project (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a, 2025b).

The historical strength of this attachment is evident in accounts of collaborators becoming emotionally invested in a project that extended beyond their individual roles and encouraged them to contribute beyond narrowly defined responsibilities: *“A sense of belonging is when you want to be there and are grateful to be there”* (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Morelli reinforced this collective orientation by representing IED through the language of “we” rather than “I.” Identification with the founder could therefore coexist with identification with a wider collective undertaking, in which collaborators perceived their own contribution as meaningful.

After his departure, this collective dimension has become an increasingly important basis of belonging. Morelli continues to matter

historically and symbolically, but organizational members no longer need their relationship with IED to be personally mediated by him. The institution and the project have instead become more immediate referents through which belonging can be experienced.

The project represents one of the clearest contemporary referents of identification. Within IED, it can take different forms, including strategic, educational, governance, thesis, or external collaboration projects, but across these manifestations it connects individual contribution to a wider collective activity: “*This is what belonging at IED means: the project*” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). Project work brings together different competencies and emphasizes collective outcomes, allowing organizational members to recognize their own contribution within activities shared with colleagues, students, professionals, and other actors. The Impact Report similarly describes IED communities as contexts in which project culture is practised and shared (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025b).

Identification is also anchored in values associated with IED, including openness, respect for diversity, and international orientation: “*A sense of belonging is connected to fundamental values: welcoming others, respect for diversity [...] and international openness*” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). These values are likewise articulated in IED’s documentary sources (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a; 2026). Together with enthusiasm, collaboration, and willingness to contribute beyond formal responsibilities, they contribute to what interviewees described as the “IED spirit,” a historically rooted way of experiencing participation in the organization rather than a culture that can simply be generated through managerial intervention.

The continuity of this spirit, however, is not regarded as automatic. As employees with direct experience of Morelli have progressively been

replaced, organizational members increasingly encounter IED through relationships, work experiences, projects, induction, and institutional narratives: “*We make sure it remains present; it is not automatic [...] this is the pillar*” (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Sustaining this form of belonging therefore requires conditions through which the historical culture of IED can remain experientially meaningful even for people who never knew the founder directly.

Induction, shared organizational narratives, and recruitment contribute to this continuity, although belonging cannot be generated through formal mechanisms alone. New employees are introduced to IED’s history and institutional characteristics, while recruitment also considers whether candidates’ motivations and ways of working are compatible with the broader organizational project: “*A motivation based on belonging and alignment with values*” (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). These mechanisms supported identification across generational turnover, but values continued to be experienced primarily through everyday relationships, participation in projects, interaction with students and colleagues, and consistency between IED’s stated identity and its actual activities (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a; 2026).

Belonging also emerges through the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the organization. Organizational members describe attachment not only as adherence to abstract values, but also as something built through professional development, meaningful work, relationships, and opportunities experienced within IED. The metaphorical description of IED as a “large family” similarly captures a relational environment and organizational “soul” capable of sustaining attachment beyond formal employment or economic rewards. The most

recent Impact Report reflects this relational dimension by presenting IED's identity as shaped through its community, relationships, inclusion, and mutual respect (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

This attachment can nevertheless create tensions when long-standing identification becomes closely associated with established ways of working. Employees with a long history in IED may respond to organizational change by referring to how activities were previously conducted. Strong identification can therefore support continuity while also making reinterpretation necessary as the institution evolves.

The reconstructed form of belonging was particularly visible in the sense of personal responsibility assumed by organizational members despite having no formal ownership rights: "*I act as if this were mine*" (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). The statement expresses care for the institution and a willingness to contribute to its preservation and development rather than legal ownership. This is particularly significant in the post-founder configuration because no single person can occupy Morelli's former position. Organizational continuity increasingly depends on multiple actors across campuses, corporate and academic functions, and the Foundation recognizing themselves as contributors to the same institutional project. What connects these different experiences is therefore not necessarily personal memory of Morelli, but participation in an institution whose history, educational purpose, and values remain recognizable.

The shift from founder-centered to organization-centered identification should therefore not be understood as replacing one source of belonging with another. Substantial continuity remains: the project, the "IED spirit," concern for young people, openness, collaboration, and the desire to create something useful originate in accounts of the founder-led period and continue to characterize IED. What has changed is the

mechanism through which these elements are experienced. They can increasingly be encountered through the organization, its people, projects, relationships, and practices without requiring the founder's personal presence.

4.5.2. Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands

Whereas the previous section examined organizational identification, namely how organizational members relate to IED and experience their membership, this theme concerns organizational identity: the collective understanding of what IED is and what purposes it serves. In the post-founder configuration, this identity has had to accommodate responsibilities that can no longer be embodied and reconciled through the judgement of a single individual. IED now combines commercial activity, academic responsibilities, Benefit Corporation purposes, Foundation ownership, and continuity with its historical project. These dimensions generate simultaneous expectations concerning economic sustainability, educational quality, social impact, managerial efficiency, academic autonomy, and historical continuity. The organizational challenge therefore lies not in eliminating these demands, but in maintaining them within a recognizable organizational purpose. Documentary evidence confirms IED's ownership by the Francesco Morelli Foundation, its Benefit Corporation status, and its corporate governance structure (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

This complexity is reflected in how organizational members describe the institution: *"We must always keep in mind the purposes for which this company exists. I call it a company, but it is an institution"* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). IED was similarly described as combining *"a corporate soul, a school soul, and a third dimension represented by the Foundation"* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED).

These expressions capture different responsibilities that have to be considered simultaneously rather than subordinated to a single organizational priority.

The coexistence of business and educational responsibilities is particularly visible in IED's internal governance. Corporate governance and executive authority are exercised through the Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer, while academic responsibilities are exercised through the Academic Director and Academic Council (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Balbo described this coexistence as structurally "bicephalous": "*Statutorily, in its very structure, this organization is bicephalous*" (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation). The term refers specifically to the coexistence of corporate and academic authority within IED, rather than to a division between IED and the Foundation, reflecting responsibilities derived from distinct institutional mandates rather than a single managerial hierarchy.

The Foundation constitutes a separate ownership and institutional level. As sole shareholder, it exercises its responsibilities through its own governance structure, while formal representation connects it with IED's academic and common-benefit dimensions (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). These institutional linkages connect the two organizations without altering the corporate-academic duality internal to IED.

Corporate and academic responsibilities are not always frictionless or equally influential: "*On one side there is the company [...] on the other there is the school [...] They are two souls that necessarily have to coexist*" and "*There is a significant difference in weight between the managerial and academic components*" (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). The post-founder configuration therefore requires continuing coordination

between actors whose responsibilities derive from different institutional mandates rather than the automatic predominance of one dimension.

Dialogue is central to this coordination. Differentiated responsibilities direct issues towards the relevant organizational actors, but do not eliminate disagreement. Tensions are instead treated as a normal feature of a complex institution and addressed through continuing interaction: *“Dialogue should always remain the main instrument for finding effective solutions”* (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). Organizational coherence therefore depends less on the absence of disagreement than on the capacity to negotiate among distinct domains of responsibility.

A second balance concerns economic sustainability and IED’s educational and social purposes. As a private educational institution, IED must generate sufficient revenues to sustain operations, employees and collaborators, educational quality, investment, and financial equilibrium. At the same time, Foundation ownership changes the organizational meaning attributed to the economic margin: *“Previously, the margin was entirely profit for a private individual; now, the margin is a gain for the community”* (R. Balbo, Group Academic Director of IED and President of the Francesco Morelli Foundation).

Profit is therefore not rejected but interpreted as a resource for sustaining the institutional project and supporting wider social purposes: *“Profit not as an end, but as a means of carrying out activities with social impact”* (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). IED’s Code of Ethics similarly specifies that distributable margins, after operational and investment requirements are met, may be transferred to the Foundation and returned to the community through its statutory activities (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). Financial equilibrium remains necessary without becoming the exclusive criterion

guiding organizational activity: *“Economic equilibrium is important, but it must not be the primary driver of activities”* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED).

The Benefit Corporation model provides a formal framework for this coexistence. The transformation in 2022 did not create IED’s educational and social orientation, which interviewees associated with its previous history, but gave contemporary organizational expression to the simultaneous pursuit of economic activity and common-benefit purposes: *“The element that holds these two souls together is the corporate structure [...] the Benefit Corporation”* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). The Impact Report likewise describes profit objectives and legally binding social and environmental purposes as operating together (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

This framework also makes the connection between everyday work and the wider institutional project more explicit. Commercial, administrative, academic, communication, and support activities contribute to sustaining the broader system even when they appear distant from the Foundation’s social initiatives. The organizational challenge is therefore to *“convey to the entire IED community [...] this sense of responsibility for one’s work”* (D. Pasotto, Executive Director, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Financial sustainability is thus understood as part of responsibility towards the broader mission rather than as an objective detached from it.

The coexistence of these demands also generated tensions between managerial structuring and creative autonomy. Stronger governance, cost control, standardized processes, and managerial efficiency are necessary to sustain a larger and more complex institution, while efficiency can itself support innovation: *“The culture of efficiency is the primary input for innovation in organizations”* (P. Vio Genova, Chief HR Officer, IED). At

the same time, excessive formalization can constrain experimentation and intuition. As has been observed: “*Order is indispensable [...] but it can inevitably limit some forms of spontaneous experimentation*” (P. Zini, Campus Director, IED Turin). The organizational challenge is therefore not to choose between structure and creativity, but to prevent managerial development from weakening characteristics regarded as part of IED’s historical core.

A related tension concerned continuity and change. Strong attachment to IED’s historical identity provides recognizable values but can become constraining when established practices are treated as the only legitimate way of operating. Long-standing organizational members may evaluate innovations against “how things were done before” even as the post-founder organization introduces structures, technologies, competencies, and practices that did not characterize the earlier configuration.

Maintaining continuity therefore requires distinguishing enduring principles from the historical practices through which they were previously enacted. The challenge was summarized as the need to “*balance continuity of values with professional management and efficiency*” (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Formal systems can therefore support organizational reliability without requiring cultural continuity to take the form of unchanged historical reproduction.

The educational model reflects the same need for continuity through adaptation. The continued involvement of professionals in teaching has preserved the founder’s emphasis on practical learning, a feature also documented in IED’s Impact Report (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Contemporary students, however, require greater attention to pedagogy, relational capabilities, personal awareness, and

human development. The original emphasis on “doing” and “knowing how to do” is therefore extended by “knowing how to be”: “*If Francesco Morelli spoke of ‘doing and knowing how to do’ [...] today we must also add ‘knowing how to be’*” (M. T. Coradduzza, Vice President, Francesco Morelli Foundation). Continuity in the educational model consequently depends on adaptation rather than unchanged reproduction.

These balances remain incomplete and require continuing adjustment. The relationship between managerial and academic authority continues to evolve; economic and social purposes are not always interpreted identically; formalization can generate tensions with creative autonomy; and educational development requires both continuity and adaptation. These negotiations concern organizational identity because they shape the collective understanding of what IED is and which purposes should guide it. Contemporary IED can simultaneously be understood as a school, a company, a Benefit Corporation, and part of the Foundation’s institutional project. Its identity is therefore sustained not by eliminating the tensions among these dimensions, but by keeping educational purpose, economic responsibility, social impact, professional management, creative culture, and historical continuity intelligible as components of the same institution.

4.6. Synthesis of the Findings

Taken together, the findings reveal three cross-dimensional patterns that characterize IED’s post-founder transformation. First, greater organizational autonomy did not develop through detachment from the organization’s historical project. Across governance, organizational practices, cultural transmission, and organizational identification, reduced dependence on Morelli’s personal presence coexisted with the continued relevance of principles associated with IED’s history. The empirical material distinguishes between organizational arrangements closely tied to

the founder-led configuration and elements regarded as more enduring. Direct personal control, informal coordination, and the overlap between ownership and executive leadership were not considered fully reproducible in the contemporary organization, whereas attention to young people, practice-based education, openness, international orientation and the social usefulness of design continued to provide recognizable points of reference. Their continuity, however, does not imply preserving past arrangements unchanged: these principles were increasingly interpreted in relation to the needs and responsibilities of the current institution.

The same pattern can be seen in the organization's identity. Morelli has remained an important historical and symbolic figure, but the sense of belonging has become increasingly linked to IED itself, its educational project, shared values, the community and day-to-day relationships. Organizational members who had never worked with him were thus able to engage with elements historically associated with his vision through their involvement in the organization. Greater independence from the founder's personal presence and continuity with the project associated with him have consequently emerged as compatible rather than conflicting developments.

A second cross-dimensional pattern concerns the relationship between differentiation and greater organizational structuring. The transition introduced more formal governance arrangements, clearer responsibilities, common processes, stronger corporate functions, and more regular mechanisms of coordination across the IED network. Yet the findings do not indicate a movement toward complete centralization or uniformity: campuses continued to retain a degree of local discretion in adapting common organizational priorities and processes to their specific territorial and educational contexts. Similarly, the distribution of authority across corporate, academic, institutional, and campus-level actors

increased the need for discussion and negotiation rather than eliminating it.

This coexistence of common structures and differentiated responsibilities is also visible in the multiple demands that characterize the current organization: economic sustainability, educational purpose, social responsibility, managerial efficiency, creativity, academic autonomy, and local responsiveness are simultaneously relevant. The findings suggest that IED increasingly operates through an organizational arrangement in which different priorities can coexist and be negotiated without necessarily being resolved through the judgement of a single individual. These more structured organizational arrangements therefore provide a more stable basis for coordination while leaving space for discretion, adaptation, and continuing negotiation.

A third pattern is the uneven and ongoing character of the transformation. The post-founder configuration has become more structured, but the degree of institutionalization varies across organizational areas. Some processes and coordination mechanisms are already recurrent and formalized, whereas other interfaces remain less codified or continue to depend partly on informal interaction and individual initiative. Integration also varies across functions and campuses, and the communication between IED and the Foundation continues to develop. The transmission of the organization's historical values is similarly not automatic: it depends on how organizational members interpret and enact them, particularly as the number of people with direct experience of the founder declines.

The post-founder transformation should therefore not be understood as a completed shift from one stable organizational configuration to another. The findings instead describe a direction of development in which greater autonomy, historical continuity, formalization, and differentiation

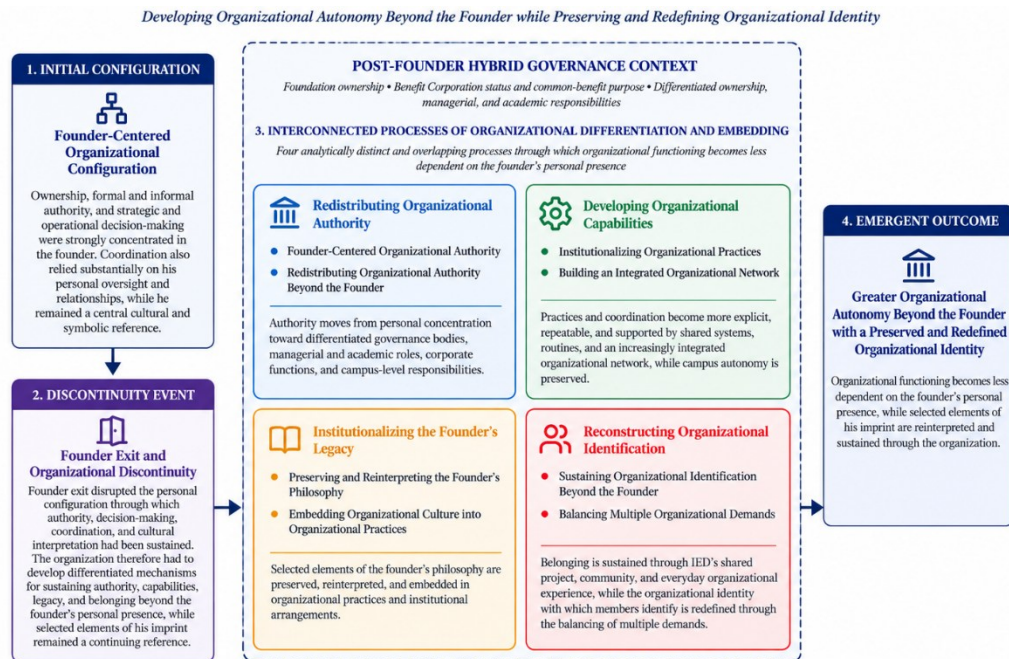
continue to be adjusted in relation to one another. These cross-dimensional patterns provide the empirical basis for the emergent conceptual model developed in the following section.

4.7. Emergent Conceptual Model

As described in *Section 3.4.5*, the transition from the Gioia Data Structure to the conceptual model involved returning to the underlying evidence and examining how the aggregate dimensions related to one another as parts of the same organizational transformation. The resulting model therefore brings together the processes discussed separately in *Sections 4.2 to 4.5* and explains how they jointly address the research question.

The model proposes that IED developed greater organizational autonomy beyond the founder while preserving and redefining its organizational identity through four interconnected processes of organizational differentiation and embedding. Differentiation occurred through the allocation of responsibilities that had previously converged in the founder across distinct governance bodies, roles, functions, and organizational units. Embedding refers to the development of organizational arrangements through which essential capabilities, selected elements of the founder's legacy, and organizational belonging could be sustained beyond his personal presence. These processes did not remove the founder's historical influence. They changed the mechanisms through which organizational functioning and continuity were maintained.

Figure 3: Emergent Conceptual Model of Organizational Transformation Following Founder Exit. Source: Author's elaboration.



Note. Solid arrows indicate the overall analytical direction of the post-founder transformation rather than exclusive causality or a sequence of fully completed stages. The four organizational processes are analytically distinct but develop in overlapping and interconnected ways.

The model distinguishes a prior organizational configuration, a discontinuity event, the context and processes through which IED responded and an emergent outcome. This analytical ordering clarifies how the transformation developed, but it does not imply a sequence of discrete and fully completed stages. The founder's departure created a strong sense of disorientation and discontinuity. In response to this event, the hybrid governance structure that emerged following the founder's passing provided the context in which the four organizational processes unfolded, simultaneously but at different speeds. The outcome represents the direction of the transformation rather than a definitive final state.

The initial configuration was founder-centered. Founder-centeredness did not derive exclusively from Morelli's formal ownership or executive authority. His involvement brought together forms of authority and organizational influence that, within a more differentiated configuration, could be distributed across several actors and structures.

Formal and informal authority, strategic and operational decision-making, coordination among organizational units, personal relationships, and the interpretation of the educational project were all strongly influenced by his presence. Decisions and coordination could therefore rely on his direct involvement and personal judgement even when formal governance bodies and managerial roles already existed. He also remained an important cultural and symbolic reference for the educational project. The initial configuration was characterized by the convergence of ownership, authority, coordination, and cultural interpretation around the founder.

This concentration helps explain why the founder's passing produced an organizational discontinuity that extended beyond the simple absence of a leader: his departure did not simply leave a vacant position at the apex of the organization; it affected the mechanisms through which decisions had acquired legitimacy, activities had been coordinated, emerging opportunities had been interpreted, and the meaning of the organizational project had been communicated. The opening of his will revealed that the Francesco Morelli Foundation would inherit his assets and become the sole shareholder of the organization. The testamentary transfer provided continuity of ownership and protected IED within an institutional arrangement that Morelli had established in advance. At the same time, the Foundation could not reproduce his former combination of ownership, direct decision-making, personal coordination, and symbolic influence.

The interviews describe an initial period of disorientation followed by organizational adjustment. Awareness that the Foundation already existed and that the transfer had been planned by Morelli helped reassure organizational members about the continuity of IED. However, continuity of ownership did not resolve how responsibilities formerly connected to the founder would be exercised. The Foundation had to clarify its role as

shareholder; governance and management actors had to work within a configuration no longer centered on the founder's final decision; and the organization had to determine how coordination, cultural continuity, and belonging could be sustained. The four processes at the center of the model represent the interconnected responses through which IED addressed these different forms of dependence.

The post-founder hybrid governance context developed from this new ownership arrangement and from subsequent institutional changes. The Foundation became IED's sole shareholder and custodian of the institutional project, while the Board of Directors and executive management assumed corporate and managerial responsibilities. Academic authority continued through the Academic Directorate and academic bodies, and corporate functions and campus directors exercised their respective responsibilities within the organizational network. The later adoption of Benefit Corporation status formalized the pursuit of common benefit alongside economic sustainability. Ownership, managerial authority, academic responsibility, social purpose, and campus-level responsibilities were therefore connected within the same organization but no longer concentrated in one actor.

In the model, *hybrid governance* is a contextual condition rather than a transitional phase or the outcome of the transformation. It defines the setting in which the four processes take place: Foundation ownership is distinct from operational management; managerial decisions must take account of academic responsibilities; economic sustainability must coexist with educational and social purpose; and stronger organizational integration must accommodate differences among campuses. These responsibilities require continuing coordination precisely because they are held by different actors and may involve different priorities.

Two conceptual distinctions clarify the relationships represented in the model. The *founder's imprint* refers to the broader and enduring effects of the founder-centered period on IED. These effects remain visible in features of the educational model, project culture, social orientation, international outlook, organizational practices, and shared understandings that developed under Morelli's influence. They may persist whether or not organizational actors explicitly identify them as elements to be retained. The *founder's legacy* has a more selective meaning. It comprises those elements of the founder's imprint that organizational actors recognize, value, and seek to carry forward. Values and principles such as attention to young people, practice-based education, curiosity, openness, and the social usefulness of design form part of the substantive content of this legacy. Institutionalizing the founder's legacy is the process through which selected elements of the broader imprint are interpreted, adapted where necessary, and transferred to organizational arrangements capable of sustaining them.

Organizational identity and organizational identification are also related but distinct. *Organizational identity* concerns the collective understanding of what IED is and which attributes provide continuity and distinctiveness to its organizational project. *Organizational identification* concerns the relationship through which organizational members develop a sense of belonging to IED and connect themselves to that project. The founder's imprint and selected legacy contribute to IED's identity, but they do not define it in its entirety. The contemporary identity of IED also reflects Foundation ownership, differentiated governance, managerial development, academic responsibilities, Benefit Corporation status, its international network, and its social purpose. The model therefore distinguishes the preservation and redefinition of organizational identity as part of the emergent outcome from the reconstruction of organizational identification as one of the processes contributing to that outcome.

Within this context, the model identifies four analytically distinct but overlapping processes: each corresponds to a different form of dependence on the founder and to a different organizational response.

Redistributing Organizational Authority addresses the previous concentration of legitimate decision-making and organizational direction around the founder. Authority moves from personal concentration towards differentiated governance bodies, managerial and academic roles, corporate functions, and campus-level responsibilities. Foundation ownership, the Board of Directors, executive management, academic bodies, corporate functions, and campus leadership exercise distinct forms of authority without reproducing their previous convergence in one individual. The development of organizational autonomy therefore does not depend on transferring the founder's authority intact to another person. It depends on making decision-making responsibilities sustainable through differentiated roles, collective bodies, and clearer domains of organizational responsibility.

Developing Organizational Capabilities addresses dependence on individual knowledge, informal coordination, locally fragmented practices, and personal relationships. Processes and coordination become more explicit, repeatable, and supported by shared systems, routines, planning mechanisms, and an increasingly integrated organizational network. The development of corporate HR, recurring reporting, common planning, standardized services, group-level functions, and stronger communication among campuses illustrates this movement. Organizational capability does not, however, require complete centralization or uniformity. Common structures provide a more stable basis for organizational functioning while campus autonomy and professional judgement continue to accommodate local, territorial, and educational circumstances.

Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy addresses the elements of founder influence that IED sought to continue. The process entails two related movements. First, elements of the founder's philosophy are identified and reinterpreted in relation to the contemporary organization. Second, selected elements are embedded in organizational practices and institutional arrangements. The Foundation, the Benefit Corporation framework, recruitment and induction, internal communication, educational activities, project-selection criteria, leadership behaviours, scholarships, social initiatives, and organizational narratives become carriers through which aspects of the founder's legacy can be sustained beyond his personal presence. The process does not preserve the founder imprint in its entirety or reproduce the founder-centered configuration. It gives organizational continuity to those elements selected as relevant to IED's contemporary purpose.

Reconstructing Organizational Identification concerns how belonging can continue when the founder is no longer available as a direct personal and symbolic reference. The findings do not suggest that identification during the founder-centered period was directed exclusively toward Morelli. They indicate, however, that his relationships and symbolic position could reinforce the connection between organizational members and IED. In the post-founder organization, the shared project, organizational community, educational and social purpose, everyday relationships, and the sense of responsibility toward IED provide foundations for belonging that extend beyond personal proximity to the founder.

This process also develops while the organizational identity with which members identify is being redefined. IED must operate as both a business and an academic institution; economic sustainability must coexist with educational and social purpose; greater managerial order must

accommodate creativity and experimentation; organizational integration must preserve meaningful differences among campuses; and institutional development must remain connected to the historical project without freezing past practices. Balancing these demands does not constitute a separate stage following the reconstruction of belonging. It constitutes part of the continuing interpretive work through which the contemporary meaning of IED is rendered recognizable to organizational members.

The four processes are interconnected because changes in one domain affect the conditions under which the others can operate. Differentiated authority requires organizational capabilities through which responsibilities can be exercised and coordinated. Shared systems and practices acquire meaning in relation to the institutional purpose they are expected to support. The institutionalization of the founder's legacy contributes historically grounded content to organizational identity, while reconstructed identification connects organizational members to the institution carrying that identity. Conversely, legacy preservation without organizational embedding could remain primarily commemorative; formal differentiation without adequate capabilities could leave newly allocated responsibilities dependent on informal knowledge; and greater formalization without a recognizable organizational identity could weaken the meaning attached to organizational participation.

The evidence supports the overlap and interdependence of the four processes, but does not indicate an identical causal relationship between every pair of processes or a fixed order in which they develop. The model is represented following its analytical direction, starting from the founder-centered configuration and the discontinuity associated with founder exit, through the four organizational processes, toward the emergent outcome. The relationships represented in the model do not indicate that one process must be completed before another begins. The findings instead show

concurrent development, different rates of progress, and uneven degrees of institutionalization across organizational domains.

The emergent outcome is greater organizational autonomy beyond the founder with a preserved and redefined organizational identity. Organizational autonomy does not mean independence from Morelli's historical influence, the disappearance of individual leadership, or the complete substitution of formal structures for informal relationships. It refers to IED's increasing capacity to sustain authority, coordination, organizational capabilities, cultural continuity, and belonging without requiring the founder to remain their indispensable personal carrier.

Organizational identity is preserved because selected attributes associated with IED's historical project continue to provide recognizable continuity. It is redefined because those attributes are interpreted and combined with features of the post-founder organization, including Foundation ownership, differentiated governance, professional management, an integrated organizational network, Benefit Corporation status, and the coexistence of academic, managerial, economic, social, and creative responsibilities. Preservation and redefinition are therefore not opposite outcomes. IED retains elements considered central to its historical purpose while changing the organizational arrangements through which that purpose is pursued.

This outcome remains under development. The findings show that some mechanisms are more established than others: coordination between corporate and academic authority continues to develop; communication between the Foundation and IED combines formal and informal channels; integration varies across functions and campuses; and the balance among managerial structure, campus autonomy, educational purpose, and creative flexibility remains subject to adjustment. Organizational autonomy and

identity redefinition should therefore be understood as ongoing organizational accomplishments rather than completed states.

The model provides an integrated answer to the research question. IED preserves and redefines its organizational identity as it develops organizational autonomy beyond the founder by differentiating responsibilities previously concentrated in the founder, embedding essential capabilities in organizational systems and relationships, selectively institutionalizing elements of his imprint as legacy, and sustaining identification with IED as a shared organizational project. The organization does not develop autonomy by detaching itself from its history, it does so by transforming the organizational mechanisms through which historically grounded identity attributes and essential organizational functions are interpreted, coordinated, and sustained.

5. Discussion

5.1. Answering the Research Question: From Founder Dependence to Organizationally Sustained Identity

The question driving this thesis is: *How does a founder-centered organization preserve and redefine its organizational identity after founder exit as it develops organizational autonomy beyond its founder?*

The findings indicate that IED preserved and redefined its organizational identity while developing greater autonomy beyond the founder by transforming the basis on which organizational functioning and continuity were sustained. Functions and meanings that had previously depended substantially on Francesco Morelli's personal authority, knowledge, relationships, and symbolic presence were not transferred intact to a single successor. They became increasingly supported by differentiated governance roles, organizational capabilities, institutional practices, relationships, and forms of belonging. Organizational autonomy therefore developed not by removing the founder's historical influence, but by reducing the organization's dependence on his personal presence and intervention as the basis of authority, coordination, continuity, and belonging.

The significance of the conceptual model for the research question lies in the relationship among its four processes rather than in each process considered separately. Redistributing authority established differentiated organizational locations from which the institutional project could be directed and interpreted. Developing organizational capabilities provided the processes and relationships required to enact that project in continuing organizational activity. The institutionalization of the founder's legacy has made it possible to pass on certain specific elements of his philosophy and values, which are deeply rooted in the institution's history; at the same time, the reconstruction of organizational identification and sense of

belonging has connected members more directly to the organization that upholds and carries forward these elements. None of these processes, when considered in isolation, would have provided a sufficient foundation for the continuity of identity: authority and capabilities could make IED operationally less dependent on the founder without necessarily preserving a recognizable connection with its historical project; legacy could retain that connection but remain primarily commemorative if it were not embedded in organizational activity; identification could support belonging, but it required an organizational project with which members could meaningfully identify. Identity continuity was therefore supported by the combination of legitimate authority, the organizational capabilities required to enact the institutional project, historically grounded meanings, and members' attachment to the organization.

This interpretation also explains how organizational identity could be both preserved and redefined. It was preserved because selected attributes associated with IED's educational and social project continued to provide recognizable continuity after Morelli's departure. It was redefined because continuity did not involve retaining the founder-centered organizational configuration or reproducing the founder's imprint in its entirety: the attributes regarded as central were selected and interpreted within a configuration characterized by Foundation ownership, differentiated governance, professional management, greater organizational integration, and more explicit academic, social, and economic responsibilities. Preservation therefore concerned continuity in selected historically grounded attributes, whereas redefinition concerned the meanings, priorities, and organizational arrangements through which those attributes were enacted. Within this new configuration, the values and educational mission associated with IED's historical project also provided a shared reference across differentiated roles, functions, and campuses, thereby contributing to organizational cohesion. The post-

founder identity remained connected to the organizational project developed under Morelli without being identical to the identity sustained through his personal leadership.

The development of organizational autonomy remains ongoing rather than complete. The differentiation of ownership, managerial authority, academic responsibility, corporate functions, and campus-level responsibilities has reduced the concentration of organizational functions in one individual, but it has also created new interdependencies. Coordination between the Foundation and operational management, corporate and academic authority, central integration and campus autonomy, and economic sustainability and educational or social purpose continues to require negotiation and adjustment. These tensions do not in themselves indicate a failure of the transformation: they show that organizational autonomy is not a final condition in which dependence and disagreement disappear, but an ongoing capacity to coordinate differentiated responsibilities without requiring a single individual to reconcile them personally. The IED case consequently suggests that moving beyond a founder involves changing the organizational carriers of continuity rather than choosing between historical identity and organizational autonomy.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This section interprets the integrated explanation developed from the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The aim is to establish which existing arguments the IED case confirms, where it specifies their boundary conditions, and which connections among previously separate perspectives it brings into view. Given the single-case design, these implications should be understood as analytically grounded interpretations of this case rather than as relationships that can be assumed to apply across founder-centered organizations.

5.2.1. Post-Founder Transformation as Functional Reallocation

Research on founder succession cautions against equating founder departure with ordinary executive turnover. In their study, Haveman and Khaire (2004) observe that founders' identities may be more closely connected to organizational identity than those of later managers and that founders often combine ownership and managerial control. When a founder occupies multiple roles, departure may require several positions to be redefined and communication and decision-making relationships to be reorganized (Haveman & Khaire, 2004).

The IED case illustrates the importance of distinguishing formal succession from the functions that remained dependent on the founder. Morelli had established the Francesco Morelli Foundation and designated it as his universal heir, thereby providing for ownership continuity and institutional protection of the project's purposes (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). IED's conversion into a Benefit Corporation in 2022 later reinforced its common-benefit commitments, but occurred five years after Morelli's passing and cannot explain the initial response to his departure (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). However, the Foundation did not constitute a single successor to the combination of ownership, final authority, managerial judgement, personal coordination, and symbolic influence previously associated with him; IED also had governance bodies, executives, academic roles, and campus structures before 2017, while the interview evidence indicates that final decisions and coordination still relied substantially on Morelli. Within this case, founder dependence therefore concerned where effective authority and integrative capacity resided, not simply whether formal roles existed.

This configuration differs from the interpersonal handover emphasized in Dyck et al. (2002)'s relay-race model, which examines

succession through sequence, timing, transfer technique, and communication between an incumbent and a successor. Morelli's sudden passing precluded such an overlap, and no individual subsequently assumed all his functions. Rather than establishing a general boundary condition for the model, the case draws attention to a different succession configuration in which ownership passes to one institutional actor while other functions are distributed. It also supports distinguishing ownership succession from broader organizational preparedness. Succession planning may address the transfer of ownership or top management, whereas replacement planning concerns continuity following the unplanned loss of key personnel and knowledge (Ip & Jacobs, 2006). IED had a predefined solution for ownership, but not an equally predefined arrangement for every managerial, coordinative, knowledge-based, and interpretive function connected to Morelli.

Taken together, the findings indicate that IED's post-founder transformation led to a functional reallocation. In this study, this expression refers to the process through which responsibilities previously concentrated and interconnected in the founder become differentiated, assigned to multiple organizational carriers, and reconnected through organizational mechanisms of coordination. Ownership and protection of institutional purpose were concentrated in the Foundation; corporate and managerial responsibility was assigned to IED's governance bodies and executives; academic authority was supported by academic roles and collective bodies; group-level functions and campus directors assumed professional and local responsibilities and planning, reporting, information systems, and inter-campus relationships supported their coordination (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). These responsibilities were differentiated but not completely separate, since several decisions continued to depend on

interaction among the Foundation, corporate management, academic bodies, central functions, and campuses.

Professionalization contributed by making priorities, responsibilities, information, and evaluation more explicit through managerial roles, planning, systems, and reporting. Hwang and Powell (2009)'s study of nonprofit organizations provides an interpretive comparison between managerial professionalism and organizational rationalization, although IED is not equivalent to their empirical setting. The case does not indicate a linear replacement of founder-centered coordination with bureaucracy. Formal arrangements existed before Morelli's departure, while the post-founder organization continued to rely on informal relationships, professional judgement, and campus autonomy. Routines can sustain recognizable patterns while remaining adaptable in practice (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), and capability development may combine experience accumulation, knowledge articulation, and codification (Zollo & Winter, 2002). Institutionalization at IED therefore involved making knowledge more accessible and activities more reproducible without assuming that academic, creative, or locally situated judgement could be fully codified.

Finally, functional differentiation increased the need for coordination. Coordination mechanisms support accountability, predictability, and common understanding among actors performing interdependent tasks (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). In IED, authority without coordination could have produced disconnected responsibilities, while systems without legitimate authority could not determine priorities or resolve disagreement. The case therefore suggests, rather than demonstrates generally, that post-founder autonomy may develop through the gradual differentiation, organizational embedding, and coordination of founder-dependent functions. This process remained ongoing, consistent

with the interview accounts describing IED's transition from "permanent adolescence" toward an "unfinished" adult phase. Organizational maturity, in this sense, does not describe a final destination, but rather the progressive development of structures capable of sustaining collective responsibility beyond the founder's role.

5.2.2. From Founder Imprint to Institutionalized Legacy: Identity Continuity through Selective Reinterpretation

The findings support a case-specific distinction among founder imprint, founder legacy, organizational identity, and organizational identification. These concepts describe related but distinct forms of continuity. *Imprinting* concerns characteristics formed during a sensitive period that persist despite later environmental change (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). At IED, Morelli's imprint encompasses his broader historical influence on the educational model, project culture, social orientation, international outlook, practices, and shared understandings. *Founder legacy* is used more selectively. Building on strategic legacy as the continuing influence of a founder's doctrines, beliefs, and values, and on founder heritage as a resource for identity continuity, it refers here to elements that later actors recognized as worth preserving (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019). Interviewees associated the legacy with young people, practice-based education, openness, international orientation, project culture, and the social usefulness of design, but not with concentrated authority, direct personal coordination, or the overlap of ownership and executive leadership. In this case, legacy is therefore interpreted as a selected part of the broader imprint, not its complete continuation.

Institutionalizing that legacy was not automatic. The expression is used here as a case-grounded synthesis for selecting founder-related principles, reinterpreting them under changed conditions, and embedding them in arrangements that can support action without the founder's

presence. This is consistent with De Cuyper et al.'s (2020) account of imprints being reinforced and reworked, but it is not a replication of their model. They examine a young social venture whose founders left early, whereas Morelli shaped IED for more than five decades. The comparison suggests only that continuity at IED likewise involved neither unchanged persistence nor complete replacement.

The educational model illustrates this reinterpretation. Morelli's emphasis on "doing" and "knowing how to do" remained recognizable, but interviewees extended it to "knowing how to be," including relational ability, personal awareness, and contemporary pedagogical needs. International openness also continued, while its expression broadened from geographical expansion to mobility, cross-campus projects, joint programs, and partnerships (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). These examples indicate how current actors connected historical principles to new practices, not that those principles remained unchanged.

Ogbonna and Harris (2001)'s distinction between inheritance and hangover qualifies this interpretation. A flexible legacy may guide later action, whereas rigid attachment to inherited commitments may generate inertia (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). The IED evidence is more consistent with inheritance insofar as participants distinguished historical principles from the founder-centered managerial configuration. Yet some accounts also linked attachment to the "IED spirit" and comparisons with earlier practices to difficulties in accepting change. Reinterpretation may therefore help preserve continuity, but the case does not exclude the possibility that the same legacy may constrain change.

Legacy was supported through several arrangements rather than a single substitute for Morelli. Beyer and Browning (1999)'s analysis is relevant only in suggesting that a leader-related mission may persist through structures, cultural forms, and practices, without implying that

IED is a Weberian charismatic case. The Foundation provides an institutional location for preserving and developing Morelli's project, and its Ethical Code combines continuity with conscious evolution (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023a). IED's Ethical Code derives its stated values from the Foundation's code, Benefit Corporation status formally connects economic activity with common-benefit purposes, and the Impact Report links those purposes to educational access, inclusion, project culture, and social responsibility (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026).

The Morelli family's involvement occurs within this configuration, not through direct family ownership: the Foundation is IED's sole shareholder (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Its Statute provides for two testament-appointed directors but does not reserve a position for the family as such (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b). According to the interviews, three family members were identified to occupy one such position sequentially. Part of the family described this role as a moral responsibility to preserve, revitalize, and transmit Morelli's values and memory. This is better interpreted as an intergenerational contribution within collective governance than as dynastic succession to Morelli's ownership and authority.

These formal arrangements document commitments and identity claims, but do not by themselves establish full institutionalization. The interviews indicate that selected principles also entered recruitment, induction, communication, project selection, scholarships, educational initiatives, and expectations concerning everyday conduct. At the same time, participants reported uneven articulation across campuses and a need for stronger communication between IED and the Foundation. The evidence therefore supports treating institutionalization as a matter of degree: recurring arrangements may facilitate transmission and enactment,

but cannot ensure identical interpretation or participation throughout the organization.

This combination may help explain IED's identity continuity. Gioia et al. (2000) distinguish an unchanged identity from continuity in which recognizable labels persist while meanings and actions evolve. Chreim (2005) similarly shows how organizations selectively draw on their past while revising broad identity labels. IED retained references to practical education, project culture, openness, young people, and social usefulness, while relating them to personal development, diversity, international collaboration, inclusion, and common benefit. Communication connected current activities with Morelli and IED's history, while recurring practices enacted some of the same principles. The case therefore suggests that historical meanings may support identity continuity when they are both narrated and enacted, without establishing that all members interpret them uniformly.

Boers and Ljungkvist (2019) describe the founder as an identity referent whose meaning may support continuity and change. Their case retained a living founder after ownership exit, whereas Morelli's posthumous role was mediated through the Foundation, institutional history, and organizational activities. IED therefore offers limited evidence that a deceased founder may remain a symbolic referent even for members who never knew him, although this possibility requires examination of other cases.

Organizational identification instead concerns members' relationship with that identity: perceived oneness with a group and self-definition through attributes associated with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). Several interviewees located belonging not only in Morelli, but also in IED's shared project, educational and social purpose, relationships, and "IED spirit". This is better described as a

possible reorientation than as a completed transfer from founder to organization. Recruitment, induction, communication, and shared projects made selected attributes accessible, but could not guarantee identification. Moreover, the sample cannot establish its distribution or intensity across employees, lecturers, students, alumni, or campuses. The case therefore suggests that institutionalizing founder-related meanings may broaden the possible bases of belonging beyond personal proximity to the founder, while leaving identification contingent and open to different interpretations.

5.2.3. Hybrid Governance as a Context for Interdependent Autonomy and Identity Continuity

IED's post-founder configuration can be interpreted through the literature on hybrid organizing, but hybridity should not be inferred from Foundation ownership or Benefit Corporation status alone. Battilana and Lee (2014) define hybrid organizing as the activities, structures, processes, and meanings through which organizations combine multiple organizational forms. At IED, four relationships concerned core activities: Foundation ownership and operational management; corporate and academic authority; economic sustainability and common-benefit purposes; and common direction and campus responsibility. They affected authority, decision legitimacy, resource allocation, and the enactment of the educational project across the network.

Besharov and Smith (2014)'s distinction between the centrality and compatibility of institutional logics helps qualify this interpretation. Multiple demands may be relevant to core functioning without being permanently aligned or necessarily conflictual. At IED, academic, managerial, economic, social, and territorial demands sometimes reinforced one another and sometimes produced differences in priorities or influence. Interdependent autonomy is therefore used here as a case-

grounded label for actors who possess differentiated responsibilities and discretion but depend on others for information, resources, authorization, legitimacy, or implementation. It is consistent with Battilana and Lee (2014)'s argument that structural differentiation creates continuing coordination requirements, but is not presented as a general model.

The first relationship concerns Foundation ownership and operational management. Industrial-foundation research describes arrangements in which a nonprofit, charter-bound foundation owns a business company (Thomsen et al., 2018). IED resembles this separation while also incorporating academic and Benefit responsibilities. The Foundation owns IED and exercises shareholder and statutory responsibilities, whereas IED retains its own Board and executive management (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). The Foundation appoints IED's directors and provides strategic, ethical, and cultural orientation, but daily management remains within IED. Their responsibilities remain connected: IED enacts the educational project and may generate resources for the Foundation's mission, while the Foundation establishes the purposes attached to ownership (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). Reports of still-developing communication between them therefore suggest a coordination need, not the absence of differentiated authority.

A second relationship concerns corporate and academic authority. Corporate bodies carry legal, financial, and managerial responsibilities, while academic bodies safeguard and develop the educational offer. The Impact Report connects the business and educational dimensions, and the Foundation's Board includes a representative of IED's common-benefit function and a member appointed by its Academic Council (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Some academic decisions require Academic Council deliberation and

corporate ratification, whereas others remain primarily managerial or academic. These arrangements connect the domains without demonstrating equal influence or complete procedural clarity. The case therefore suggests that differentiated authority makes coordination between academic judgement and managerial responsibility a continuing requirement.

Economic sustainability and common benefit constitute a third relationship. The Italian Benefit Corporation remains a for-profit company but formally incorporates specified common-benefit objectives and reporting obligations (Marchini et al., 2023). This legal status formalizes a dual purpose but does not prove that the two objectives are balanced in every decision. At IED, interviewees presented economic sustainability as necessary for educational activities, employment, investment, and the Foundation's social initiatives. Conversely, Benefit purposes provided criteria for the intended social contribution of organizational activity and distributable margins. IED's Ethical Code explains that margins may be transferred to the Foundation only after operational commitments, investment, development, and medium- and long-term sustainability have been addressed (Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2025a). The evidence therefore indicates an organizationally constructed relationship between margin and mission, not their automatic compatibility.

The fourth relationship connects common direction with campus responsibility. Central functions increasingly provided shared objectives, systems, information, and resources, while campus directors retained responsibility for adapting them to different educational portfolios, stakeholder relationships, and territorial conditions. The findings do not equate integration with eliminating local autonomy. Campuses depended on group-level resources and comparable information, while central functions depended on local knowledge to make common direction

meaningful. The alternation between greater centralization and local discretion is therefore better interpreted as continuing adjustment than as movement toward a final, uniform model.

This configuration may also support identity continuity by distributing responsibility for different components of IED's institutional project. The Foundation anchors its long-term educational and social purposes; academic bodies interpret the educational mission; corporate governance supports organizational and economic viability; the Benefit framework formalizes common-benefit commitments; and campuses enact the project locally. This does not establish that these actors always agree or contribute equally. Rather, the case suggests that the founder's former integrating role was partly replaced by relationships among differentiated actors. In connection with *Section 5.2.2*, hybrid governance provides a context in which selected founder-related principles can be preserved and reinterpreted without requiring organizational uniformity.

Finally, the findings portray this configuration as incomplete. Communication between the Foundation and IED is still developing, corporate and academic influence is perceived as uneven in some areas, and the balance between central direction and campus responsibility continues to change. The metaphor of the transition from organizational "adolescence" to "adulthood" describes actors learning to exercise responsibility without relying on the founder as a common point of integration. Adulthood, in this sense, does not correspond to the disappearance of tension or to complete proceduralization. It corresponds to a greater capacity to keep distinct responsibilities connected and to revise their relationships without losing the institution's recognizable purpose. The theoretical contribution of the case is thus to show how hybrid governance can provide a context in which organizational autonomy develops through differentiated but mutually dependent

responsibilities. This configuration supports identity continuity not by resolving plurality into a single logic, but by providing governance relations through which different components of IED's purpose can continue to inform one another. Formal structures alone are insufficient, since weak communication and coordination may produce distance, imbalance, or fragmentation. Hybrid governance is thus treated here as an evolving organizational configuration rather than a settled solution.

5.3. Managerial Implications

The findings suggest that founder succession and post-founder transition should be managed as the organizational redistribution of functions that had depended on the founder, rather than only as the appointment of a new leader. This implication is most relevant to mature founder-centered organizations in which the founder has combined several forms of influence, including formal authority, operational coordination, organization-specific knowledge, cultural interpretation, external and internal relationships, and symbolic meaning. It should not be treated as a blueprint for reproducing IED's particular governance arrangements in other organizations. The practical value of the case lies instead in distinguishing different forms of founder dependence and in showing that each may require a different organizational response.

The first managerial implication is therefore to assess functional dependence on the founder before a planned succession or, when advance planning is no longer possible, as early as possible during the post-founder transition. This assessment should begin by comparing the founder's formal position with the functions that the founder actually performed. An organizational chart can provide an initial representation of reporting relationships, but it may not capture responsibilities exercised through personal authority, informal coordination, organization-specific knowledge, relationships, or symbolic influence. Haveman and Khaire

(2004) show that founder succession may require the redefinition of several managerial positions and the redrawing of communication and decision-making lines, particularly when the departing founder occupied multiple roles. The findings from IED extend this diagnostic beyond managerial positions by showing that founder dependence may also concern cultural interpretation and organizational identification.

Managers should consequently examine at least four domains: where decision-making authority remains personally concentrated; which organizational capabilities depend on the founder's knowledge, relationships, or coordination; which founder-related principles the organization intends to retain; and how the founder contributes to members' understanding of and attachment to the organization. For each domain, the assessment should identify the specific activity involved, the knowledge and relationships required to perform it, the organizational consequences of its interruption, and whether another role, body, process, or organizational arrangement is already capable of sustaining it. The objective is not to classify every aspect of organizational life as founder-dependent. It is to identify the functions whose continuity would be materially weakened by the founder's absence before deciding how they should be redistributed.

This diagnosis should be followed by an explicit allocation of founder-dependent functions to organizational roles and arrangements suited to the nature of each function. Searching for a complete replica of the founder assumes that functions accumulated in one person should remain combined in another. The IED case indicates that this may reproduce personal dependence while placing unrealistic and potentially conflicting expectations on the successor. Legitimate authority may instead be distributed across governance bodies, managerial and professional roles, and clearly defined authorization procedures.

Organizational capabilities may be sustained through processes, systems, planning mechanisms, documented knowledge, and organizational networks. Selected elements of the founder's legacy may be supported by ownership and governance arrangements, recurring institutional practices, recruitment and induction, projects, and organizational narratives. Identification cannot be assigned to a formal body in the same way, but its development can be supported through shared purpose, participation, organizational community, and everyday relationships. The managerial objective is therefore not to eliminate individual leadership, but to prevent essential organizational functions from depending on the irreplaceability of one individual.

The resulting allocation should be made visible and understandable throughout the organization. The IED case indicates the value of aligning formal governance and organizational documents with internal communication. Different instruments can perform different functions: statutes or articles of association can define ownership and governance responsibilities; organizational charts and role descriptions can locate formal responsibilities; delegations and authorization procedures can clarify who is entitled to make or approve particular decisions; codes of ethics and purpose statements can express the principles expected to guide organizational conduct and recurring reports can provide evidence of how responsibilities and commitments have been enacted. These instruments should be mutually consistent and explained to the people expected to use them. Formal publication alone does not ensure that employees understand where authority resides, how responsibilities are divided, or how their own work relates to the wider organizational project.

Redistributing functions is not sufficient if managers do not carefully define the coordination mechanisms connecting the roles, governance bodies, functions, and organizational units to which those

functions have been allocated. Without appropriate coordination, redistribution may result in fragmented authority, duplicated activities, unresolved disagreements, or gaps for which no actor assumes responsibility. The allocation of decision-making authority should therefore specify who is responsible for making a decision, who must be consulted, which information must be shared, which forms of professional or governance approval are required, and how unresolved issues should be escalated. Where decisions involve economic, professional, academic, or purpose-related considerations, the criteria used to formulate, evaluate, authorize, and report those decisions should also be clarified, together with responsibility for applying them.

Different forms of interdependence may require different coordination arrangements. Coordination between a board and executive management may depend on formal reporting and authorization procedures; decisions involving academic and corporate responsibilities may require a joint deliberation or approval process; and coordination between a central function and a campus may require shared planning, recurring information exchange, and clearly defined areas of local discretion. Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) show that coordination can be supported through plans, rules, roles, routines, meetings, and other organizational arrangements that create accountability, predictability, and common understanding. Battilana and Lee (2014) similarly observe that structural differentiation creates additional coordination requirements and may require spaces in which actors responsible for different activities can discuss the trade-offs they encounter. These mechanisms are particularly important in post-founder organizations because the founder may previously have connected the same domains informally and personally.

A further implication concerns the boundary between institutionalization and standardization. Managers should formalize

activities that must be performed accurately, reliably, and at recurring intervals to ensure organizational continuity. This is particularly important when errors, delays, inconsistent information, or the loss of knowledge held by particular individuals could compromise essential organizational activities. Clear responsibilities, shared data, planning cycles, minimum service standards, succession processes, and recurring accountability mechanisms can reduce this exposure. Formalization should not, however, be extended indiscriminately to every aspect of work. Educational judgement, creative practice, people management, and relationships with local stakeholders continue to require experience and contextual interpretation. Feldman and Pentland (2003) show that organizational routines can produce both stability and change because their general pattern guides action while their performance by particular actors in particular situations allows variation. The operational implication is to clarify the common purpose, required information, allocation of responsibility, minimum expected outcome, and reporting requirements of a process while preserving discretion over how those requirements are enacted where professional or local knowledge is consequential. In a multi-campus organization, central coordination can thus strengthen local responsibility when it provides reliable resources and a common direction, but it can weaken it when uniform procedures displace relevant territorial or educational judgement.

The distinction developed in the findings between the founder's broader imprint and the selected legacy that the organization seeks to retain leads to another operational implication: managers should not treat all founder-era principles and practices as equally binding. Preserving the founder's original purpose does not necessarily require preserving every method through which that purpose was historically pursued. Some practices may embody principles that remain central to the organization's contemporary identity, while others may reflect the founder's personal

decision-making style, the organization's previous scale, or environmental conditions that have subsequently changed. The former may continue to guide organizational choices; the latter may need to be modified or discontinued. Ogbonna and Harris (2001) show why this distinction matters: a flexible founder legacy can operate as a guiding philosophy, while an inflexible legacy can reinforce commitment to practices that no longer fit changed conditions. Consistent with their recommendation that strategic planning include a historical audit, managers should periodically examine which organizational assumptions, objectives, practices, and decision criteria originated during the founder-led period (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001). The review should establish what each claimed element of legacy means in substantive terms, how it relates to the organization's present purpose, which decisions it should influence, and whether its current enactment continues to serve that purpose (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001).

Commemorative communication is not sufficient to institutionalize the selected legacy. Histories, founder narratives, and value statements can make the legacy intelligible, but their managerial relevance depends on whether selected principles are also reflected in recurring choices and activities. Recruitment criteria, induction, project selection, resource allocation, educational initiatives, leadership conduct, and accountability practices may provide different opportunities for such enactment. The purpose is not to convert an open-ended heritage into an exhaustive behavioural code. It is to make sufficiently clear which historically grounded commitments remain relevant and to allow their practical meaning to be reconsidered as the organization changes. This reduces two opposing risks: that the founder's influence survives only as symbolic memory with little connection to organizational action, or that appeals to the legacy are used to prevent legitimate adaptation.

The findings further imply that managers should support identification through participation rather than relying on communication alone. Organizational identification concerns whether members use attributes associated with the organization in defining themselves, and it therefore cannot be assumed to follow automatically from a formal statement or from contractual membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). Managers can nevertheless shape the conditions under which such a connection becomes possible. Employees should be given recurring opportunities to understand the organizational project, recognize how their work contributes to it, cooperate across roles and organizational units, and participate in activities through which the stated purpose becomes observable. Recruitment and induction can introduce the project to new members, but continued involvement, transparent communication, credible managerial behaviour, and everyday relationships influence whether that project is experienced as an organizational reality. This implication is especially important after founder exit because belonging that was partly reinforced by personal proximity must become possible for members who never knew the founder. The aim is not to manufacture uniform attachment, but to broaden the available bases of belonging while accepting that identification will remain variable across people, roles, and organizational locations.

Finally, post-founder transformation should be treated as an ongoing managerial responsibility rather than a project completed when new roles and structures have been introduced. The four forms of dependence may change at different rates, and an arrangement that initially supports continuity may later produce new bottlenecks or concentrations of responsibility. Managers should therefore review periodically whether the allocation of decision-making authority remains clear; whether governance and coordination forums connect the actors whose work has become interdependent; whether critical knowledge is accessible beyond

particular individuals; whether common systems still leave appropriate room for professional and local judgement; and whether founder-related principles continue to inform the organization's current purpose rather than being reproduced through inherited habit. These reviews can be incorporated into recurring planning cycles and repeated after major changes in leadership, scale, organizational structure, or strategic direction. The review should also determine whether new personal dependencies are forming around a chief executive, senior professional, relationship broker, or another actor who has become the sole connection between otherwise differentiated domains. The objective is not to eliminate dependence among organizational members. Organizations necessarily rely on specialized expertise and interdependent contributions. The objective is to prevent one individual from becoming the only available carrier of an essential organizational function and to ensure that coordination remains supported by arrangements that are understandable, revisable, and collectively sustainable.

Taken together, these implications establish an operational sequence for managing post-founder transformation. Managers should first identify the activities, responsibilities, knowledge, relationships, cultural meanings, and forms of belonging that remain dependent on the founder. They should then allocate those functions across appropriate roles, governance bodies, processes, systems, practices, and organizational relationships. The resulting allocation should be made transparent through coherent governance documents, defined responsibilities, authorization and reporting procedures, and internal communication. Coordination mechanisms should connect the actors and units whose responsibilities have become interdependent. Managers should subsequently distinguish the activities requiring accurate and reliable repetition from those requiring professional or local judgement, and the founder-related principles considered central from historically contingent practices that

may be changed. Participation and everyday organizational relationships should provide members with opportunities to connect themselves to the contemporary organizational project. Finally, the entire configuration should be reviewed over time to identify unresolved gaps, new concentrations of dependence, and changes in the relevance of inherited practices.

This sequence reframes succession from the search for a person capable of replacing the founder into the development of an organization capable of sustaining functions that had previously converged in the founder. The IED case suggests that post-founder autonomy is strengthened when authority, capabilities, legacy, and the conditions supporting identification are differentiated without being disconnected. Its managerial significance therefore lies neither in erasing the founder nor in reproducing the founder-centered organization, but in building an organization capable of carrying forward a recognizable purpose through arrangements that can continue to evolve.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study presents several limitations that define the boundaries within which its findings and theoretical model should be interpreted. First, the research is based on a single case study. The in-depth examination of IED made it possible to reconstruct the post-founder transformation and develop a process model grounded in the relationships among authority, organizational capabilities, founder legacy, and member identification. However, IED was not selected as a sampling unit intended to represent a wider population of founder-centered organizations. The study therefore cannot establish how frequently the same mechanisms occur in other organizations. The study therefore supports analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018): the empirical evidence is used to develop a conceptual explanation of how founder-dependent functions can

be redistributed and embedded within organizational arrangements. This explanation may provide a basis for interpreting or investigating other post-founder transitions, but its applicability to those situations must be examined rather than assumed (Yin, 2018).

This limitation is reinforced by the specificity of the empirical context. IED combines private higher education, foundation ownership, Benefit Corporation status, international and multi-campus operations, and the coexistence of corporate and academic authority. This configuration made it possible to observe how different organizational actors and arrangements contributed to sustaining autonomy and identity after the founder's departure. At the same time, organizations operating under different ownership structures, institutional constraints, or professional systems may redistribute founder-dependent functions through different mechanisms. The model should therefore be interpreted as an explanation developed within a particular organizational configuration rather than as a universally applicable sequence.

Second, the composition of the interview sample affects the range of perspectives represented in the analysis. The participants were purposively selected because they occupied organizational or institutional roles that provided direct knowledge of the transition, governance arrangements, and changes introduced after the founder's departure. Their accounts were particularly informative for reconstructing the transformation at the organizational level. However, the limitation therefore concerns the extent to which their accounts can be extended to the wider organizational community. As the sample consisted mainly of individuals holding managerial or senior institutional roles, the study is unable to determine whether the same meanings and the same degree of identification also characterize other staff members, lecturers, students and former students, or, more generally, members of the various campuses.

The findings demonstrate how identification was experienced by the participants and identify the organizational processes through which it may be supported, but they do not measure its distribution, strength, or variation across the organization.

Third, the study relies partly on retrospective accounts. Participants reconstructed the founder-centred organizational configuration and the subsequent transformation after many of the relevant changes had already occurred. Such accounts may be affected by selective memory, retrospective sensemaking, or the tendency to present past decisions as more coherent than they appeared when they were made (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Retrospective sensemaking does not necessarily mean that these accounts are inaccurate. Rather, it means that past events are interpreted from a later standpoint and in light of knowledge about what subsequently occurred (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover, interview reports concerning past events may be affected by incomplete recall or inaccurate articulation (Yin, 2018), while participants may consciously or unconsciously present events in ways consistent with their present organizational roles and institutional responsibilities (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The use of multiple informants and documentary triangulation reduced reliance on any single reconstruction, but it could not entirely remove these retrospective limitations. Documentary triangulation also has boundaries. Many of the documents used in the analysis were produced by IED or the Francesco Morelli Foundation. They provided important evidence concerning formal governance arrangements, organizational purposes, reporting practices, and the institutional representation of the founder's legacy. Nevertheless, organizational documents are produced for particular purposes and audiences and should not be treated as neutral or exhaustive descriptions of organizational life (Bowen, 2009). They provide stronger evidence of formal commitments and institutionalized representations than of how

those commitments are interpreted or enacted by every organizational member.

Fourth, the transformation examined in this study is still developing. Some governance arrangements and organizational practices have become established, while others remain under development or display different levels of institutionalization across functions and campuses. The findings therefore capture a stage in the process rather than its definitive outcome. They cannot establish whether the current distribution of responsibilities will remain stable, whether new dependencies will emerge, or whether the organization's interpretation of the founder's legacy will change over time. Relatedly, the process model identifies plausible relationships among the founder's departure, the redistribution of authority, the development of organizational capabilities, the institutionalization of legacy, and the reconstruction of identification. It does not demonstrate that every observed change was caused exclusively by the founder's departure. Other developments, including organizational growth, international integration, managerial professionalization, and the adoption of new legal and institutional commitments, may also have contributed to the transformation. The absence of a comparison case or counterfactual limits the possibility of isolating the effect of founder departure from these concurrent developments.

Finally, the study does not evaluate whether the post-founder configuration produces superior organizational performance. The model explains how the organization sought to sustain autonomy and identity after losing the founder as a central personal reference. It does not establish whether the resulting arrangements necessarily improve economic sustainability, academic quality, social impact, employee experience, or other outcomes. The preservation of autonomy and identity should

consequently be interpreted as an organizational process examined by the study, not as evidence that a particular governance configuration is inherently more effective.

These limitations indicate several priorities for future research. Comparative studies could examine post-founder transformations across organizations differing in sector, size, ownership, professional structure, and governance configuration. Comparisons between foundation-owned and conventionally owned organizations, as well as between planned and unexpected founder departures, could clarify which elements of the model are transferable and which depend on particular contextual conditions. Multiple-case research could also assess whether authority, capabilities, legacy, and identification are consistently redistributed to different organizational arrangements or whether alternative configurations emerge.

Longitudinal research, understood as the investigation of the same case at two or more points in time, could provide a more direct account of how the transformation develops (Yin, 2018). Following these processes before, during, and after founder departure would make it possible to examine how responsibilities are initially redistributed, how coordination arrangements become established or are subsequently revised, and whether new forms of personal or organizational dependence arise over time. Comparing evidence collected at different stages would also show whether these arrangements remain stable and whether interpretations of organizational identity and founder legacy change as new members enter the organization. Rich longitudinal evidence is particularly useful for examining dynamic processes whose mechanisms and consequences unfold over time (Siggelkow, 2007).

Future studies should also include a broader range of organizational members and compare perspectives across hierarchical levels,

professional groups, and local units. Including employees, lecturers, students, alumni, and actors from different campuses could establish whether the organizational identity articulated through governance documents and senior accounts is recognized in everyday experience. It could also reveal where interpretations of the founder's legacy converge, where they remain contested, and how participation and local relationships affect identification with the organization.

Finally, future research could combine qualitative and quantitative evidence to examine both how the processes identified in this study develop and whether they are associated with measurable organizational outcomes. Qualitative interviews and observations could continue to investigate how responsibilities are redistributed, how practices become institutionalized, and how members interpret organizational identity and founder legacy. Surveys could assess the strength and distribution of identification across employees, lecturers, students, alumni, and different campuses, while organizational data could be used to examine indicators such as employee retention, economic stability, academic outcomes, social impact, or the consistency of coordination processes. Combining these forms of evidence would allow future studies to move beyond reconstructing the transformation and assess whether differences in authority distribution, organizational capabilities, legacy institutionalization, and identification are associated with different outcomes (Yin, 2018).

6. Conclusions

This thesis addressed the organizational problem created when founder departure removes not only a leader, but also a point of convergence for authority, knowledge, relationships, values, and identity. The literature reviewed explains important aspects of founder succession, imprint persistence, organizational capacity, and identity continuity, but offers a less integrated account of how an organization can reduce its dependence on the founder while retaining and revising historically significant meanings (Haveman & Khaire, 2004; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Ogbonna & Harris, 2001; Schein, 2010). The study therefore examined autonomy and identity continuity as connected dimensions of the same post-founder transformation.

IED provided an analytically revealing setting because Morelli's departure was followed neither by family succession nor by the appointment of an individual expected to reproduce his composite role. Ownership was transferred to the Francesco Morelli Foundation, while managerial, corporate, academic, and institutional responsibilities became differentiated within a configuration that also incorporated Benefit Corporation commitments (Fondazione Francesco Morelli, 2023b; Istituto Europeo di Design S.B.p.A., 2026). Evidence from interviews and organizational documents made it possible to reconstruct how this transformation was understood and organized, without treating IED as representative of all founder-centered organizations.

In answer to the research question, the IED case indicates that organizational identity was preserved and redefined as functions previously dependent on the founder were progressively reallocated and embedded within organizational arrangements. Authority was distributed across distinct governance and managerial actors; essential activities became more explicitly supported by organizational practices and an

integrated network; selected elements of the founder's legacy were formalized and reinterpreted, and participants located their belonging not only in Morelli but also in IED's project, values, relationships, and organizational community. These processes did not occur as separate stages or amount to the complete removal of personal dependence. Their interdependence gradually changed the basis on which organizational continuity could be sustained.

The central conclusion is therefore not that autonomy required the founder's influence to disappear, but that it involved a change in how that influence and the functions associated with it were carried. Meanings linked to Morelli remained recognizable, but their continuity was supported by collective roles, recurring practices, formal commitments, and organizational participation rather than his direct interpretation and intervention. Identity continuity likewise did not mean preserving an unchanged organization. It involved retaining a recognizable institutional project while allowing its meanings and forms of enactment to evolve. Hybrid governance provided the context for this redistribution, but did not remove differences among ownership, management, academic authority, Benefit responsibilities, and campus autonomy. Coordination arrangements across these domains continue to evolve, suggesting that the broader transformation is still underway.

The study consequently offers a case-grounded explanation of post-founder transformation as a reorganization of the institutional basis of continuity. Its contribution is analytical rather than statistically generalizable: the model identifies relationships that may inform the examination of other founder-centered organizations, but their relevance must be assessed in different settings and over time. Within these boundaries, the IED case suggests that moving beyond a founder does not necessarily require choosing between historical continuity and

organizational autonomy. It may instead require transforming personal dependence into organizational arrangements capable of preserving what later actors consider valuable while permitting the organization to interpret, coordinate, and develop that inheritance collectively.

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Appendix A. Complete Gioia Coding Structure

The table reports the complete mapping of the 112 first-order concepts to the eight second-order themes and four aggregate dimensions. Representative quotations are presented in Chapter 4 and in the condensed Gioia Data Structure.

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Founder had the final say across strategic and operational decisions	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Founder authority rested on charisma, vision, and personal trust	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Founder presented IED as a shared “we” project	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Founder built direct and human relationships with people	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Founder remained the point of reference even when not physically present	Founder-Centered Organizational Authority	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation decisions are distributed across multiple governance and advisory bodies	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Academic decisions are discussed and formalized through academic bodies	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
As sole shareholder, the Foundation appoints the Board and approves financial statements	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation and IED coordinate through formal and informal communication channels	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Corporate, academic, ownership, and operational responsibilities are held by different actors	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Decisions now pass through collective bodies and shared responsibility	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation ownership initially required organizational adaptation and reassurance	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation provides strategic and value guidance while safeguarding IED’s identity	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Governance increasingly relies on formal procedures, statutes, resolutions, and approval channels	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Campus directors hold formal local responsibility and decision space	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation developed its role through learning, comparison, and external legitimacy	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
CEO retains managerial autonomy within Foundation ownership	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Foundation evolved from a dormant structure into an active institutional owner	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Family presence is limited rather than constituting the post-founder ownership structure	Redistributing Organizational Authority Beyond the Founder	Redistributing Organizational Authority
Processes are becoming more standardized, explicit, and repeatable across the organization	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Foundation activities are increasingly documented through recurring reporting and impact measurement	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Future workforce needs and critical roles are increasingly planned in advance	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
HR has evolved from local administration toward a strategic corporate function	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
People management increasingly covers the employee lifecycle from selection to development	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Reliable administration and compliance underpin the HR function	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Recruitment uses more structured and differentiated assessment methods	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Self-financing, fundraising, and resource discipline support long-term sustainability	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Well-being and psychological support have become organizational responsibilities	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Labor relations are increasingly coordinated through formal collective arrangements	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Professional lecturers increasingly require pedagogical development	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
People are actively involved and supported through organizational change	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Planning and financial control increasingly structure organizational management	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Digital tools increasingly systematize organizational processes	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Student-facing processes are redesigned around user needs	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Managerial capabilities, KPIs, and standards support more structured management	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Strategic reflection is increasingly organized through recurring management processes	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
The educational offer is being rationalized and aligned across sites	Institutionalizing Organizational Practices	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Communication is moving from local fragmentation to a coherent group-wide narrative	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Local autonomy is preserved within common group direction	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Foundation–site relations require more stable two-way interfaces	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Internationalization is expanding beyond owned-site growth toward networked and digital forms	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Milan Campus is expected to function as a hub for the wider network	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Sites remain rooted in local ecosystems while contributing to the wider group	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
IED is moving from a collection of autonomous sites toward an integrated network	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Key support functions are increasingly coordinated at corporate level	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Campus directors integrate multiple local responsibilities within group frameworks	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Regular meetings and communication channels connect sites and central functions	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
External partnerships and European networks expand resources, learning, and legitimacy	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
International collaboration is increasingly activated through exchanges and joint projects	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Shared processes, indicators, and tools make sites more comparable and connected	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Digital tools have accelerated cross-site coordination	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Milan Campus is a central organizational transformation project	Building an Integrated Organizational Network	Developing Organizational Capabilities
Foundation protects IED's assets, project, and value legacy	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Young people remain at the center of the organizational mission	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Project culture links design and education to practical and social usefulness	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Education is understood as personal, civic, and social empowerment	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Education remains grounded in practice and direct contact with professionals	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Economic resources are treated as means to sustain the mission and social impact	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Foundation projects, scholarships, and social initiatives translate founder values into contemporary action	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Founder's entrepreneurial biography and mindset remain sources of organizational meaning	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
The broad mission is periodically translated into current strategic priorities	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Curiosity, listening, and anticipation continue to orient educational development	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Founder memory is carried by people who act as custodians and representatives	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Legacy is actively selected and reinterpreted as the organization changes	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Founder's death and succession choices frame the post-founder narrative	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
International development continues alongside strong cultural roots	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
The original educational formula is renewed rather than simply reproduced	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Foundation provides value guidance without managing daily operations	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Beauty and aesthetics remain part of the organizational experience	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Openness and diversity remain recognizable founder values	Preserving and Reinterpreting the Founder's Philosophy	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Recruitment selects for cultural and value alignment alongside technical competence	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Induction and internal communication transmit history, values, and identity	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Leadership and team practices are expected to reflect organizational values	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
The Foundation is increasingly integrated into IED's organizational narrative	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Communication messages are increasingly built jointly across organizational actors	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Diversity, openness, and inclusion are enacted in organizational practice	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
IED's history and founder remain recurring references in organizational storytelling	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Project criteria translate social and cultural values into concrete choices	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Ethical and benefit governance formalize organizational values	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Narratives are adapted to different audiences while preserving a core message	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Values are transmitted through everyday consistency more than formal campaigns	Embedding Organizational Culture into Organizational Practices	Institutionalizing the Founder's Legacy
Attachment is reinforced by emotional involvement, reciprocity, and meaningful work	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
The "IED spirit" continues to provide a distinctive sense of identity	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
A strong organizational identity supports attractiveness and engagement	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Belonging is experienced as participation in IED's shared project	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Educational mission and social contribution provide collective meaning	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Openness and international orientation contribute to a shared organizational identity	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Organizational community and relationships sustain belonging	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Selection and socialization reinforce value-based belonging	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Long-standing members act as custodians of organizational memory	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
People can feel responsible for IED "as if it were theirs"	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Foundation work is associated with non-economic sources of motivation	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Foundation work is motivated by social impact more than personal economic reward	Sustaining Organizational Identification Beyond the Founder	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
IED must operate simultaneously as a business and an academic institution	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Historical identity must be preserved without freezing past practices	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Post-founder transition requires continuity while accepting discontinuity and change	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Professional management supports organizational maturation	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Growth and internationalization must not erode organizational coherence	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Initiative, dedication, and personal responsibility remain valued during professionalization	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Project work and collaborative teams integrate actors around shared outcomes	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Students, access, and educational impact remain central amid transformation	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Workforce flexibility and labor-market pressures require continuing adjustment	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Common direction must coexist with site differences and local autonomy	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
More order and efficiency must coexist with experimentation and creativity	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
People are expected to cope with uncertainty, adapt, and anticipate change	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Skills and human capital are aligned with future organizational needs	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Company, school, Foundation, and Benefit dimensions must coexist within one project	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Economic results are necessary but interpreted in relation to social purpose	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Dialogue and informal coordination complement formal governance	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Formal structures do not fully capture IED's organizational complexity	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
External legitimacy and partnerships help address emerging organizational demands	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification
Trust remains an important relational resource during transition	Balancing Multiple Organizational Demands	Reconstructing Organizational Identification