

Understanding organizational empowerment through the McKinsey 7S framework: a case study of Haier's Rendanheyi reform

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Abstract. Against the background of accelerated digital transformation and increasing market uncertainty, empowerment-oriented organizational reform has become an important approach for enhancing organizational adaptability. This study takes Haier's Rendanheyi reform as a case and applies the McKinsey 7S framework, combined with literature review and case analysis, to examine how organizational empowerment mechanisms are formed through the alignment of different organizational elements. This study further refines the general relationships among organizational elements into a more process-oriented model of empowerment mechanism formation. These findings suggest that empowerment-oriented reform requires continuous alignment among strategic direction, structural arrangements, shared values, and resource-based capability support. The Haier case shows that these three pathways can facilitate the transformation of empowerment from organizational design into innovation, performance improvement, and user value creation. However, its effectiveness is also constrained by conditions such as senior management support, employee acceptance, institutional and cultural context, and the organization's resource base. Therefore, empowerment-oriented reform should be understood as a conditional process of organizational change, rather than a model that can be simply replicated.

Keywords: employee empowerment, Rendanheyi, McKinsey 7S framework, organizational change

1. Introduction

Against the background of intensifying market competition, increasingly personalized user needs, and the continuous advancement of digital transformation, traditional hierarchical organizations are often prone to slow responses and limited adaptability [1]. To enhance organizational adaptability, empowerment-oriented reform has gradually become an important approach to enterprise organizational change. Empowerment-oriented reform generally refers to the decentralization of authority and the provision of greater decision-making autonomy to employees or teams, enabling them to make decisions and take action with less direct supervision [2]. However, empowerment is not equivalent to ordinary task delegation. If an organization only requires employees to assume greater responsibilities without providing corresponding resources, information, and decision-making authority, empowerment may become merely a transfer of responsibility rather than genuine empowerment [3, 4].

Existing studies have discussed empowerment-oriented reform from different perspectives. Structural empowerment emphasizes the decentralization of formal authority and decision-making discretion [4, 5]. While psychological empowerment focuses on employees' perceived meaning, autonomy, competence, and influence in their work [6]. From a capability-based perspective, whether empowerment can function effectively also depends on whether employees are provided with the resources, information, and capability support required to assume new roles and responsibilities [7, 8]. These studies suggest that empowerment-oriented reform is not a single-level process of decentralization, but an organizational change process involving structural arrangements, employees' subjective perceptions, and capability support.

Although existing research has examined empowerment-oriented reform from structural, psychological, and capability-based perspectives, further integration is still needed to explain how these dimensions are connected and how they jointly transform empowerment from organizational design into practical outcomes. If analysis focuses only on decentralization, employee psychology, or capability support in isolation, it may overlook the continuous relationships among strategy, structure, systems, shared values, and capability building. To address this gap, this article takes Haier's Rendanheyi reform as a case and analyses the mechanism of empowerment-oriented reform from the perspective of coordination among organizational elements. Based on the McKinsey 7S framework, this article seeks to answer the following question: How do organizational elements in the McKinsey 7S framework interact to shape the empowerment mechanism in Haier's Rendanheyi reform?

2. Theoretical framework and analytical model

2.1. The McKinsey 7S framework as an organizational analysis tool

As discussed above, empowerment-oriented reform is an organizational change process involving structural arrangements, employee acceptance, and capability support. Therefore, the analysis of empowerment-oriented reform should not focus on any single dimension in isolation. Instead, it needs to be understood from a socio-technical perspective, which considers both the organization's structural, systemic, and technological conditions, as well as social factors such as staff, shared values, and capability formation.

The McKinsey 7S framework provides a useful analytical framework for this purpose [9, 10]. It not only covers several key dimensions of organizational change, including strategy, structure, systems, shared values, style, staff, and skills, but also emphasizes the interrelationships among these elements. Its basic structure is shown in Figure 1.

Among the seven elements, strategy, structure, and systems mainly reflect the formal arrangements of organizational change, including goal setting, power distribution, operational rules, and performance mechanisms. By contrast, shared values, management style, staff, and skills are more closely related to the social and capability-related dimensions of change. These elements concern how employees understand reform goals, how managers promote change, and whether organizational members have the capabilities required to undertake new roles. Therefore, the 7S framework can be used not only to analyze the structural and institutional foundations of empowerment-oriented reform, but also to examine its shared values and capability support.

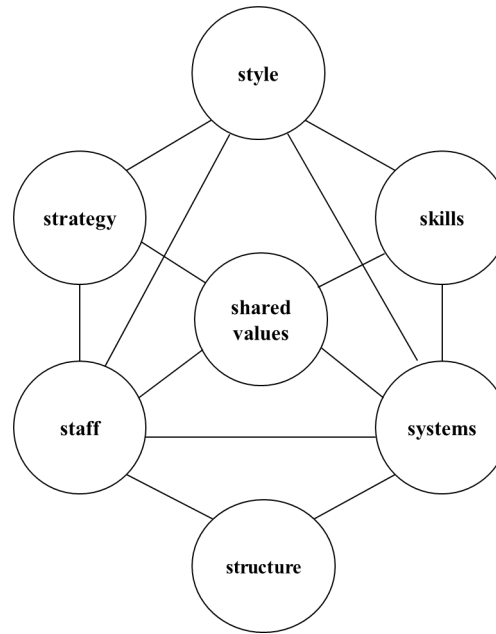


Figure 1. The McKinsey 7S framework (adapted from McKinsey & company) [9]

2.2. From organizational elements to empowerment pathway

Studies of the McKinsey 7S framework emphasize the interconnections among organizational elements [10]. However, because the relationships among the seven elements are complex, and analysis that remains only at the level of overall interdependence may still find it difficult to explain how empowerment-oriented reform gradually operates within an organization. Therefore, based on the 7S framework, this paper further organizes these relationships into three more specific pathways of empowerment mechanisms. In doing so, it transforms the general interconnections among the 7S elements into a more dynamic analytical framework for examining the empowerment process. This allows the analysis to focus on how empowerment-oriented reform is formed, transmitted, and translated into organizational outcomes.

The empowerment mechanism can be summarized into three interrelated pathways: strategic execution, value internalization, and capability formation. These three pathways explain how empowerment-oriented reform is translated from organizational strategy into practical action, from institutional arrangements into employees' sense of responsibility, and from formal decentralization into employees' actual capacity to act.

The strategic execution pathway mainly involves the relationships among strategy, management style, structure, and systems. Empowerment-oriented reform first requires a clear strategic direction, which then needs to be translated into daily operational arrangements. If strategic goals are not supported by corresponding structures and systems, empowerment may remain at the level of rhetoric. Therefore, this pathway mainly explains how empowerment can be transformed from high-level strategic goals into concrete organizational action.

The value internalization pathway mainly involves the relationships among structure, systems, and shared values. Empowerment not only requires employees to obtain a certain degree of autonomy but also requires them to accept new work values and responsibility logics. Through structural arrangements and performance systems, organizations can embed user value, outcome responsibility, and self-management into daily work, thereby guiding employee behavior. However, this process may also require employees to bear greater uncertainty and stronger responsibility for outcomes, which can lead to the internalization of pressure.

The capability formation pathway mainly involves the relationships among shared values, staff, skills, and institutional support. After the strategic execution pathway provides structural momentum and the value internalization pathway establishes an internal responsibility logic, employees are not only required to undertake new roles, but may also develop stronger intrinsic motivation to improve their capabilities and create user value. At this stage, the organization needs to provide the necessary support for practical action through institutional arrangements, information systems, resource allocation, and technological platforms. In other words, capability formation results from the combined effects of employee initiative and organizational support. When employees receive corresponding support on the basis of value acceptance, empowerment can be further translated into practical organizational outcomes.

3. Overview of Haier's Rendanheyi reform

Haier Group was originally a refrigerator manufacturer based in Qingdao, China, and later developed into a globally influential white goods company. With the intensification of market competition, increasingly personalized user demand, and the declining responsiveness of traditional hierarchical organizations, Haier began to explore more flexible, user-oriented, and innovation-oriented approaches to organizational change [11]. The Rendanheyi reform merged against this background.

Rendanheyi was proposed by Zhang Ruimin, the founder of Haier Group. In this concept, "ren" refers to employees or members of xiaowei enterprises, referring to Haier's micro-enterprises with autonomous business responsibilities. "dan" refers to user value and market orders, and "heyi" emphasizes the direct alignment between the value created by employees and users' needs and business outcomes. Its core objective is to achieve zero distance to the user [11, 12]. Through adjustments to organizational structure, performance systems, and platform mechanisms, Rendanheyi seeks to transform employees from passive executors of managerial instructions into business actors closer to the market and users.

For this paper, the value of the Haier case lies not only in its representativeness as a case of empowerment-oriented reform, but also in the longitudinal and evolutionary characteristics of Rendanheyi itself. Although Rendanheyi was first proposed in the early twenty-first century, it has undergone a continuous process of development from strategic business units and autonomous operating units to xiaowei networks and platform-based organization [11]. Therefore, this case shows how empowerment-oriented reform gradually develops into a more comprehensive organizational mechanism through the long-term adjustment of strategy, structure, systems, shared values, and capability support. In this sense, the Haier case remains analytically significant.

4. 7S diagnosis and three pathways of empowerment mechanism formation

4.1. A 7S diagnosis of Haier's Rendanheyi reform

Before entering the three-pathway analysis, this paper first conducts an overall diagnosis of Haier's Rendanheyi reform based on the 7S framework. This diagnosis is carried out from two main aspects. The first is the supporting role of each element in the empowerment mechanism, and the second is the risks, costs, and replication constraints that each element may entail. Through this diagnosis, it can be initially observed that Rendanheyi is not a reform driven by a single organizational element, but one that involves the comprehensive coordination of strategy, structure, systems, shared values, management style, staff, and skills.

Table 1 shows that Rendanheyi provides strong support for empowerment-oriented reform at the strategic, structural, and institutional levels. Its strategic goal of zero distance to the user, xiaowei structure,

performance-based compensation mechanisms, and user platforms enable employees and teams to engage more directly with users, the market, and business outcomes.

Table 1. A 7S-based diagnosis of Haier's Rendanheyi reform

7S Element	Support for Empowerment Mechanism	Main Tensions and Limitations	Explanation
Strategy	High	Medium	Zero distance to the customer and entrepreneurial autonomy strongly support empowerment by bringing employees and teams closer to users and the market. However, the narrative of employee entrepreneurship may shift market pressure downward.
Structure	High	High	The shift from hierarchy to ZZJYT and xiaowei decentralized managerial autonomy, making structure the core empowerment mechanism. However, overseas replication remains difficult due to institutional, cultural, and employee-level differences.
Systems	Medium High	High	Performance-based compensation, user-value indicators, open platforms, and resource mechanisms supported accountability and xiaowei action. However, they also created high costs, pressure and turnover risks.
Shared Values	Medium High	High	User value, employee entrepreneurship and independent operation supported an empowerment culture. However, value acceptance was unstable and cross-border adaptation was difficult.
Style	Medium High	Medium High	Management supported innovation, experimentation and autonomy. However, the reform was senior-management-driven, reflecting top-down empowerment rather than fully spontaneous autonomy.
Staff	Medium	High	Employees shifted from executors to entrepreneurs, and teams gained staffing authority. However, large departures show high adaptation costs and uneven acceptance of entrepreneurial roles.
Skills	Medium High	Medium High	Xiaowei used external partners and headquarters platforms to address capability gaps. However, resource integration capabilities remained uneven.

However, Rendanheyi is not without tension. Its effectiveness is subject to important conditions related to shared values, employee adaptation, and capability formation. Whether employees are willing to accept entrepreneurial roles, whether they possess resource integration capabilities and market judgement, and whether the organization can continuously provide resource support will all affect the actual operation of the empowerment mechanism. Therefore, the 7S framework can not only present the main organizational arrangements of Rendanheyi reform, but also reveal its internal contradictions and limitations.

Based on the 7S diagnosis, the following section analyses how the three pathways of strategic execution, value internalization, and capability formation operate in Haier's Rendanheyi reform, and how they jointly explain the effectiveness and conditionality of the reform.

4.2. Strategic execution pathway

The strategic execution pathway mainly explains how empowerment-oriented reform is translated from organizational strategy into specific structural arrangements and daily operational mechanisms. In the Rendanheyi reform, this pathway is mainly reflected in the alignment among strategy, management style, structure, and systems. For empowerment-oriented reform, simply proposing autonomy, innovation, or user orientation is not sufficient to change how an organization operates. Only when these strategic goals are supported by corresponding organizational structures and institutional mechanisms can empowerment be transformed from an abstract concept into practical action.

The core strategic goal of Haier's Rendanheyi reform is to achieve zero distance to the user. This goal requires the organization to move beyond traditional hierarchical structures as the main channels for information transmission and decision approval, and to grant greater room for action to employees or teams closer to the user and the market. Traditional hierarchical organizations are often associated with slow information flows, lengthy decision-making chains, and clear departmental boundaries. By contrast, Rendanheyi seeks to shift decision-making authority, business responsibility, and user feedback closer to the market through the xiaowei structure [11]. Therefore, the xiaowei structure becomes a key link in the strategic execution pathway.

In this process, management style also plays an important role. Rendanheyi is an organizational change promoted over a long period by Haier's senior management under the leadership of Zhang Ruimin, rather than an autonomous model spontaneously generated by grassroots teams. Existing literature suggests that Haier's leadership provided clear strategic repositioning, organizational restructuring, and the dissemination of management concepts. For example, from 2005 to 2009, Haier established strategic business units and introduced new information systems and performance measurement mechanisms. Around 2010, it developed ZZJYT, referring to autonomous operating units. Around 2014, Haier was further reorganized into a network of xiaowei enterprises. Zhang Ruimin also continuously reinforced the necessity of change and the principle of user orientation through internal speeches, employee letters, training, and corporate culture building [11, 13]. Therefore, Haier's empowerment has clear features of top-level design. It does not completely abolish managerial control, but creates greater autonomy for frontline teams by redesigning organizational structures, performance mechanisms, and cultural communication practices.

Institutional mechanisms further ensure that strategic goals are embedded in daily work processes. Haier links the actions of xiaowei enterprises with user needs and business outcomes through performance-based compensation, user-value indicators, open user platforms, and resource allocation mechanisms [11, 14]. Xiaowei enterprises are granted a certain degree of autonomy, but they are also required to be accountable for business outcomes. User platforms enable teams to access user feedback and market information more

directly, allowing them to adjust products and services around user needs [15]. As a result, zero distance to the user is embedded in organizational structure, performance evaluation, and resource flows.

The strategic execution pathway shows that the empowerment effect of Rendanheyi first derives from the alignment among strategic goals, organizational structure, institutional mechanisms, and managerial promotion. Through the xiaowei enterprise structure and performance systems, Haier reconfigures the relationships among authority, responsibility, and resources. This enables empowerment to serve user orientation, market responsiveness, and innovation goals. However, this pathway also contains certain tensions. Because the reform is highly dependent on continuous senior-level promotion and institutional design, its empowerment is closer to partial autonomy enabled by top-level design rather than fully spontaneous self-organization.

4.3. Value internalization pathway

The value internalization pathway mainly explains how empowerment-oriented reform is transformed from external organizational arrangements into employees' internal understanding of work responsibilities and organizational goals. Compared with the strategic execution pathway, this pathway pays greater attention to the relationships among structure, systems, and shared values. If empowerment-oriented reform only changes the organizational structure without reshaping employees' understanding of work roles, responsibility boundaries, and value goals, its effect may remain limited. Therefore, genuine empowerment should not only enable employees to act, but also help them understand the purpose of their actions, the users or outcomes they are responsible for, and the way in which they should be accountable for results.

In the Rendanheyi reform, Haier embeds the concept of user value, employee entrepreneurship, and self-management into daily work through the xiaowei enterprise structure and performance systems. Through the xiaowei enterprise structure and performance systems, employees are continuously exposed to user feedback, market pressure, and business outcomes in their daily work [15]. The xiaowei enterprise structure requires employees to stay close to users, the performance system requires employees to stay close to users, the performance system requires teams to be accountable for outcomes, and user platforms continuously strengthen the influence of user needs on organizational action [11]. Therefore, zero distance to the user gradually shifts from a strategic goal to a criterion for evaluating employees' daily work. Whether employees create useful value for users is not only related to organizational goals but also directly connected to team performance and individual rewards.

However, the value internalization pathway is also one of the most tension-filled aspects of Rendanheyi reform. Empowerment not only brings a positive sense of autonomy, but it may also lead employees to internalize greater market pressure and business risks. When employees are expected to work as entrepreneurs, they not only gain a certain degree of autonomy but also need to assume stronger performance responsibilities, market uncertainty, and pressure for business outcomes. In the process of promoting Rendanheyi in China, Haier also faced high costs of employee adaptation. One study points out that in the ten years following the Rendanheyi reform, more than 20,000 employees left Haier because they were unable or unwilling to accept the new management system [11]. This suggests that entrepreneurial empowerment is not naturally accepted by all employees, and that some employees may understand it as pressure decentralization or responsibility transfer.

This tension becomes more evident in transnational implementation. Employees in different countries and regions often have different expectations regarding work boundaries, employment relationships, salary stability, and occupational security. In contexts that place greater emphasis on clear job responsibilities, fixed remuneration, and labour protection, employees may be less willing to accept highly market-oriented

entrepreneurial roles. They may also not naturally understand responsibility for business outcomes as part of their autonomy.

Haier's overseas practices also reflect this limitation. For example, in its US subsidiary, Haier did not fully replicate the Chinese xiaowei enterprise model, but instead established a larger-scale platform organization, where employee remuneration was not fully linked to platform performance. In Russia, although the senior management team was organized according to the Chinese xiaowei model, ordinary employees still mainly worked within a hierarchical structure, and autonomous enterprises or xiaowei enterprises were not widely formed [11]. This suggests that value internalization is not automatically completed once institutional arrangements are introduced. Rather, it is jointly shaped by cultural differences, labour systems, and organizational environments. Similar empowerment arrangements are introduced. Rather, it is jointly shaped by cultural differences, labour systems, and organizational environments. Similar empowerment arrangements may generate different levels of understanding and acceptance across national and organizational contexts, making the model difficult to replicate directly.

The value internalization pathway shows that Rendanheyi's empowerment mechanism not only changes organizational structures but also seeks to reshape how employees understand work, users, and self-responsibility. Its positive effect is that it can transform user value and self-management into daily work logic, thereby enhancing organizational market responsiveness and proactive innovation. However, its limitations are also evident. Shared values are not automatically formed through institutional design, and whether employees accept this value logic also depends on their risk preferences, career expectations, compensation culture, and organizational environment. Therefore, value internalization is not only an important mechanism through which Rendanheyi produces empowerment effects, but also a major source of its conditionality and replication difficulties.

4.4. Capability formation pathway

The capability formation pathway mainly illustrates how empowerment-oriented reform is transformed from formal decentralization into the actual capacity of employees and teams to act. Empowerment does not mean that employees can automatically undertake new roles simply because the organization reduces control and expands their autonomy. If employees lack the necessary information, resources, skills, and collaborative support, formal autonomy may instead create new pressure. Therefore, the capability formation pathway focuses on the relationships among staff, skills, systems, and resource support. It examines how the organization enables empowered employees and teams to identify problems, integrate resources, and take responsibility for outcomes.

In the Rendanheyi reform, the xiaowei enterprise structure changes the role orientation of employees. In traditional hierarchical organizations, employees mainly complete assigned tasks according to the instructions of their superiors. By contrast, members of xiaowei enterprises need to directly face user needs, market orders, and business outcomes. Employees are no longer merely executors of internal organizational processes, but are gradually transformed into business actors closer to users and the market. This role change places higher capability requirements on employees. Members of xiaowei enterprises not only need to complete specific work tasks, but also need to understand user needs, identify market opportunities, coordinate internal and external resources, and adjust their actions according to business outcomes. This means that empowerment not only changes the distribution of authority and responsibility, but also redefines the capability structure required of employees.

As a result, this capability support makes it easier to translate empowerment into innovation and market outcomes. Haier does not leave xiaowei enterprises to undertake user demand identification and resource

integration alone. User platforms enable xiaowei enterprises to obtain user feedback and market information, allowing them to understand user needs more directly. External partners can provide a headquarters platform that plays a coordinating role in resource allocation and capability supplementation to a certain extent. For example, Haier once connected household water-quality testing, user demand, and water purification solutions through water purification-related platforms, making it easier for technological solutions to be transformed into market sales and attracting the participation of external resources [11]. This shows that empowerment in Rendanheyi does not simply expand employee autonomy, but further transforms employees' market-oriented action capabilities into user value and business outcomes through platform and resource support.

However, the success of this pathway is also clearly conditional. Platform construction, data analysis, external collaboration, and resource coordination all require a strong organizational foundation. The shift of employees from executors to business actors may also create high adaptation costs. The large-scale employee turnover during Haier's reform suggests that not all employees were willing or able to accept this new role [11]. For critics, Rendanheyi may not only grant employees autonomy but also transfer the pressure of market judgment, resource integration, and business outcomes to employees.

Therefore, the capability formation pathway explains not only why Rendanheyi can support innovation and user orientation, but also why it is difficult to replicate directly. For enterprises with smaller scale, weaker resources, or insufficient digital platform capabilities, imitating the xiaowei enterprise structure may not generate the same capability support system. Haier's brand foundation, platform resources, supply chain capabilities, and headquarters support provide a certain buffer and risk-control basis for the transformation of xiaowei enterprises, so that employees and teams are not completely isolated when facing market pressure. This suggests that genuinely effective empowerment is not achieved simply by granting autonomy. It also requires organizations to continuously provide information, resources, and capability-building support.

5. Discussion

5.1. 7s-based empowerment process model

To answer the research question of how organizational elements in the McKinsey 7S framework interact to shape the empowerment mechanism in Haier's Rendanheyi Reform, Figure 2 summarizes the sequential and interrelated relationships among the three empowerment mechanism pathways and their main conditional constraints.

The Figure 2 shows that empowerment-oriented reform begins with strategic execution, develops an internal logic of employee responsibility through value internalization, and is further translated into innovation and performance outcomes through capability formation. However, each pathway depends on specific organizational and contextual conditions, which means that the effects of empowerment-oriented reform are clearly conditional rather than universally guaranteed.

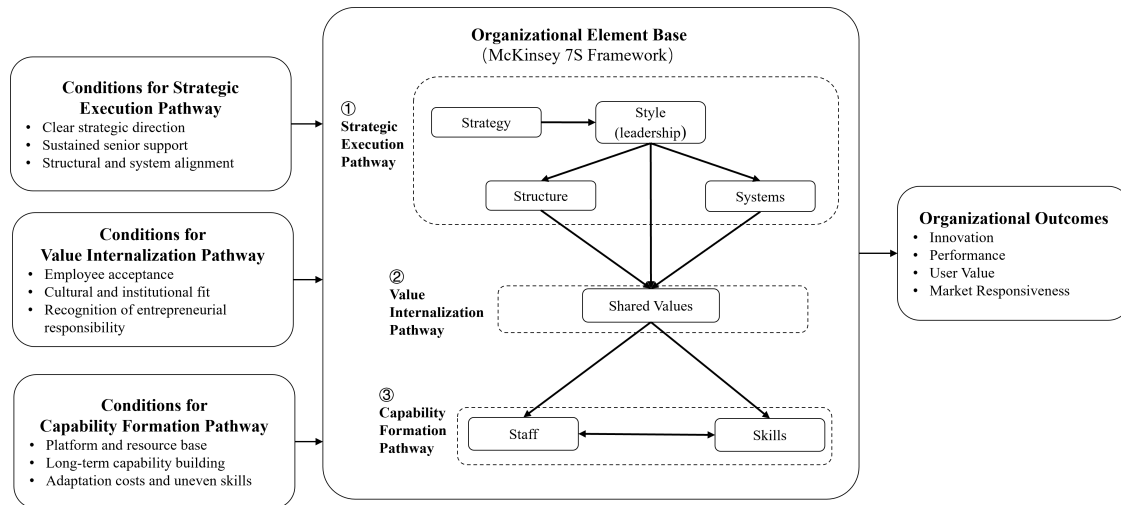


Figure 2. A 7S-based process model of empowerment mechanism formation

5.2. Conditionality and replication limits

Figure 2 shows that employment reform is a process gradually transmitted through organizational elements and constrained by multiple conditions. First, the strategic execution pathway mainly revolves around strategy, leadership style, structure, and systems. It reveals that frontline autonomy can be transformed from organizational goals into concrete actions only when there is a clear strategic direction, continuous senior-level support, and alignment between structure and systems. Moreover, the value internalization pathway takes shared value as the key connecting point, indicating that whether empowerment can further take effect depends on whether employees accept autonomous operation, user orientation, and responsibility for outcomes. This process is also affected by the cultural environment, institutional context, and employees' understanding of affected by the cultural environment, institutional context, and employees' understanding of responsibility. In addition, the capability formation pathway further shows that, in order for empowerment to be transformed into organizational outcomes, staff, skills, and organizational support need to work together. This requires platform and resource foundations and long-term capability to adapt to cost and capability differences.

Thus, the relative effectiveness of Rendanheyi in Haier's domestic context stems from the continuous connection among these three pathways and their supporting conditions. Its replication limitations also show that these strategic, value-based, and capability-related conditions are difficult to transfer fully to other organizations or transnational contexts. Only when the three pathways are promoted sequentially and work together can empowerment-oriented reform be transformed from formal decentralization into actual organizational effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes Haier's Rendanheyi reform as a case. Drawing on the McKinsey 7S framework, it further refines the general relationships among organizational elements into a process-oriented model of empowerment mechanism formation. In doing so, the paper analyses how organizational elements jointly shape the empowerment mechanism and reveals the conditions and limitations involved in the empowerment process. The findings show that strategy, leadership style, structure, systems, shared values, staff, and skills in the 7S framework do not operate in isolation, but are connected through strategic execution, value

internalization, and capability formation. Therefore, empowerment-oriented reform should be understood as a process that relies on the coordination of organizational elements and conditional support.

However, this paper is mainly based on a single case and secondary data, and the 7S framework cannot cover all factors that may affect the effectiveness of empowerment. Therefore, future research could further combine multiple-case comparison with first-hand employee-level data to examine under what conditions empowerment can become genuine empowerment, and under what circumstances it may be transformed into pressure decentralization or responsibility transfer.

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