

# The Triggering and Restoration of Organizational Legitimacy Crises: A Case Study of Xibei Prepared Foods from the Perspective of Career Calling

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## Abstract

Organizational legitimacy is vital for an organization's survival and development; however, existing research has predominantly focused on macro-level analyses, leaving the micro-level transmission mechanisms of organizational legitimacy crises underexplored. To address this gap, this study adopts the perspective of career calling to construct an integrated analytical framework. Using the "Xibei prepared foods" incident in China as a typical case, this research employs a single-case study method to investigate the micro-level triggering and restoration mechanisms of organizational legitimacy crises. The findings reveal that the collapse of organizational legitimacy's three core dimensions—pragmatic, moral, and cognitive—impacts the corresponding dimensions of employees' career calling (personal meaning, other-oriented meaning, and action orientation), thereby forming a mutually reinforcing transmission mechanism. Based on this interaction, the study proposes dual-loop legitimacy restoration mechanisms driven by career calling, which involve internal value-behavior alignment and external communication-transparency strategies. This research contributes by enriching the micro-foundations of organizational legitimacy theory and offers

practical guidance for enterprises, particularly in the catering sector, to manage and recover from legitimacy crises.

**Keywords:** Organizational legitimacy, Career calling, Prepared foods, Case study, Organizational legitimacy crisis

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, economic development has accelerated the pace of life, further advancing China's prepared foods industry (Zhang et al., 2024). However, the rapid expansion of this industry has also sparked public discourse and concern regarding the perceived health impacts of prepared foods and consumer rights to information in different contexts, leading to intense scrutiny of related news events (Shu et al., 2024). When companies are implicated in negative incidents involving prepared foods, the public's strong reaction can lead to questioning, loss of social endorsement, and ultimately, an organizational legitimacy crisis (Breitsohl, 2009). Recently, a Weibo post by a well-known Chinese online opinion leader, Luo Yonghao, ignited widespread public debate. In the post, he publicly questioned Xibei (a major restaurant chain) about its extensive use of prepared foods. The public expressed considerable doubt and dissatisfaction with the brand's integrity. The initial defiant response from the founder, Jia Guolong, followed by subsequent corrective measures, further escalated the controversy. This ultimately resulted in a halving of customer footfall and the closure of 102 outlets (Zhou, 2026). Disputes over prepared foods are frequent, and this incident is not isolated. Similar cases have occurred in recent years. For example, influencer Xin Ba's claim during a live stream that "prepared foods are healthier and more sanitary for children" provoked public backlash; Tmall's advertisement for prepared foods New Year's Eve dinners faced resistance; and Hefu Noodle House, which markets itself on "wellness" was questioned after being exposed for using prepared noodles (Miaojian Research Institute, 2024; Cover News, 2026). At their core, these incidents represent a clash between the catering industry's pursuit of efficiency and consumer value perceptions. When a company's production model deviates from consumer expectations rooted in traditional cognition, social values, and interests, organizational legitimacy is prone to systemic collapse, triggering a crisis.

From a micro-level perspective, legitimacy construction hinges on interactions between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders (Martin-de Castro, 2021). Employees, as the most crucial internal stakeholders, play a direct role in establishing and maintaining organizational legitimacy through their cognition and behavior. Career calling, representing a deep alignment between personal and organizational values, enables employees to participate in legitimacy construction. Employees with strong career calling exhibit higher job performance and contribute more significantly to the organization's broader interests (Duffy et al., 2018). However, the onset of an organizational legitimacy crisis can destabilize their career calling, leading employees to diminish their profession, perceive a weakened mission, and hinder its enactment. This manifests in reduced service initiative, increasingly negative communication attitudes, and a gradual erosion of professional identity. These negative states further exacerbate the public's loss of trust in the enterprise, intensifying the organizational legitimacy crisis.

While the importance of organizational legitimacy in crisis management is widely acknowledged, existing research exhibits limitations in two key areas. On the one hand, studies on organizational legitimacy predominantly focus on topics such as corporate sustainability (Li et al., 2026), its interrelationship with organizational reputation (Lim & Zhang, 2025), its influence on corporate social responsibility initiatives (Adeoye, 2024), and legitimacy acquisition by startups (Fisher, 2020). In-depth exploration of the micro-level transmission mechanisms that trigger crises and systematic analysis of the psychological and behavioral changes of internal employees remain scarce. On the other hand, research on career calling has concentrated primarily on specific groups like university students, medical professionals, and teachers (Yang & Su, 2025; Bott et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2024), with less attention paid to employees within corporate settings. Its underlying mechanism in the context of corporate crises has not been fully investigated.

To address these gaps, this paper constructs an analytical framework by integrating the perspective of career calling. Using the Xibei prepared foods incident as a case study, it investigates the following research questions:

- 1) How is an organizational legitimacy crisis triggered, transmitted, and amplified internally within the organization?
- 2) How can enterprises repair organizational legitimacy through career calling?

Through this case study, the research aims to dissect the interaction mechanism between the collapse of the three core dimensions of organizational legitimacy and the fluctuation of employee career calling. It seeks to reveal the underlying logic of crisis triggering and explore a legitimacy restoration pathway driven by career calling, thereby providing theoretical guidance for enterprises facing similar crises.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 The Three Dimensions of Organizational Legitimacy*

The classic definition of organizational legitimacy, proposed by Suchman integrating institutional and strategic perspectives, refers to "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995). This implies that organizational legitimacy represents audiences' positive attitudes toward objects that align with shared expectations (Schoon, 2022). For organizations to obtain widespread recognition from stakeholders and thereby achieve stable and sustainable operations, their various behaviors must conform to socially constructed value systems. Consequently, legitimacy is directly related to organizational survival and development. Organizational legitimacy is divided into three core dimensions: pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy.

First, pragmatic legitimacy. This dimension rests on the "self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences" (Suchman, 1995)—that is, whether organizational behaviors can bring perceived practical benefits to stakeholders. This dimension represents

the form of legitimacy over which organizations can exert the greatest control (Jansma et al., 2020), focusing solely on whether the organization can satisfy audiences' interest needs.

Second, moral legitimacy. This dimension is centrally oriented toward "doing the right thing." Grounded in socially shared value systems, it emphasizes that corporate behaviors should align with societal ethical expectations and contribute to the advancement of social welfare (Islam et al., 2022). In essence, it reflects stakeholders' positive evaluations of organizational conduct.

Third, cognitive legitimacy. This dimension constitutes the most powerful source of organizational legitimacy construction (Li et al., 2025). Organizations gain broad social acceptance when their behaviors align with the tacit assumptions embedded in the public's subconscious regarding the nature and structure of various social activities (Yasmin & Ghafran, 2021), leading such behaviors to be perceived as a taken-for-granted way of acting.

### *2.2 Core Elements of Career Calling*

Career calling represents an employee's emotional commitment to the organizational mission. Individuals with a strong career calling are more likely to derive a sense of purpose and perceive meaning in their work (Guo & Ren, 2026). It fulfills the need for spiritual fulfillment within one's profession, providing psychological achievement and a sense of life purpose. Furthermore, it enhances professional capabilities and, in turn, fosters career development (Faletihan & Wempe, 2025), serving as a meaningful foundation for shaping professional roles (Ni et al., 2024). Structurally, career calling encompasses three core elements: personal meaning, other-oriented meaning, and action orientation (Praskova et al., 2015).

Personal meaning, the essence of career calling, refers to the intrinsic value individuals perceive in their profession, which aligns with their self-identity, values, and life goals. It serves as the primary psychological driver for long-term dedication to one's vocation. Specifically, the personal meaning of a calling lies in the authentic perception of a connection between one's work and broader, ultimate life goals (Al Halbusi et al., 2025). Consequently, individuals with a strong career calling regard their work as a source of personal fulfillment, thereby enhancing their job performance (Zhou et al., 2025).

Other-oriented meaning reflects the belief that one's professional actions exert a positive influence on others, viewing one's work as socially valuable and conducive to societal development (Mauno et al., 2025). This dimension emphasizes that career calling extends beyond self-satisfaction to encompass a sense of responsibility and contribution to external groups.

Action orientation constitutes the tangible manifestation of career calling. It refers to the sustained, proactive behavioral strategies and tendencies adopted by individuals to enact their career calling.

### *2.3 Integrated Theoretical Framework*

In summary, this paper posits that the triggering of an organizational legitimacy crisis is, in

essence, the simultaneous collapse of its three core dimensions: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Employees' responses during such a crisis are linked to organizational support and resources (Kim, 2020). Therefore, fluctuations in career calling induced by the crisis can, in turn, accelerate its deepening. Notably, employees' career calling can, to some extent, mitigate the negative impacts of an organizational legitimacy crisis (Zhou et al., 2024). Consequently, the restoration of organizational legitimacy can be advanced from both internal and external levels.

Regarding internal restoration, individuals often proactively negotiate their identity relationship with the organization to construct, transform, or stabilize their organizational membership (Petriglieri, 2015). Employees' sense of belonging at work is positively associated with career calling. Enhancing their sense of organizational identity and integration allows them to perceive deeper value and purpose in their work, thereby strengthening their career calling (Ma et al., 2025). This indicates that employees' identification with their work organization is closely related to internal legitimacy restoration actions (Howard & Brown, 2024). Simultaneously, legitimacy recovery can be promoted through effective sensemaking (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020). By employing specific symbolic expressions and value dissemination for sensemaking, enterprises can reshape their corporate values, enabling employees to reposition their professional value and reconstruct a deep connection with their work. This process fosters and strengthens career calling (Rikhardsson et al., 2021), laying the psychological groundwork for the internal restoration of organizational legitimacy.

At the external restoration level, effective communication strategies serve as a crucial means for legitimacy repair (Coombs, 2020). Transparent information dissemination can effectively alleviate stakeholder anxiety and rebuild trust-based connections (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Communication with external stakeholders, such as consumers and the public, requires not only directly addressing the core controversies of the legitimacy crisis but also dispelling external doubts about corporate behavior through information disclosure, response to demands, and action implementation. Such transparent operational and communication strategies can also, in reverse, signal to internal stakeholders the enterprise's determination and actions in upholding its values and actively repairing legitimacy, thereby further reinforcing employees' career calling.

Therefore, adopting the research perspective of career calling, this paper constructs an integrated theoretical analytical framework. It aims to explore how the collapse of the three dimensions of organizational legitimacy triggers a crisis and to identify the mechanisms for legitimacy restoration. The specific framework is as follows (Figure 1):

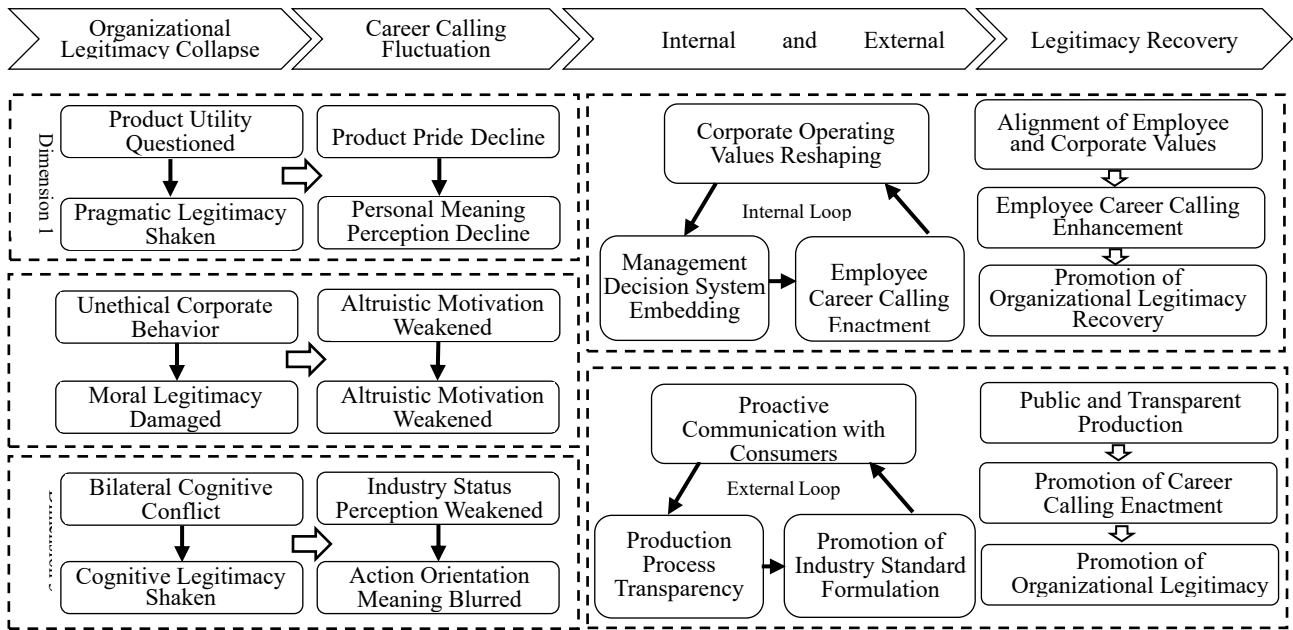


Figure 1. Research Framework Diagram

### 3. Research Methodology and Case Selection

The case study method facilitates a systematic investigation of complex phenomena within their natural contexts, thereby deepening the understanding of such phenomena (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Among these approaches, the single-case study method offers unique analytical advantages in uncovering unexpected findings and exploring their underlying causes (Nickels et al., 2022). Therefore, this paper adopts a single-case study approach, selecting Xibei as the research object. By systematically analyzing the background, development process, and outcomes of the events surrounding Xibei, this study aims to dissect the internal causes of its organizational legitimacy collapse and explore the repair mechanisms for organizational legitimacy from the perspective of career calling.

Xibei, with its unique brand positioning of "modernization of Chinese cuisine" and innovative development strategies, has garnered extensive market recognition and consumer trust. It holds a significant market position in China's catering industry, particularly as a leader in the children's meal sector and family dining scenarios. Selecting this enterprise as the research case offers strong typicality and representativeness.

To comprehensively obtain detailed information about the Xibei-related events, this paper collected textual data from a variety of sources, including news media, new media platforms such as WeChat public accounts, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, as well as the company's official announcements. Through the comparison and analysis of this multi-source data, a precise and complete timeline of the event's development was constructed.

### 4. Case Chronology

Xibei, also known as the Xibei Catering Group, was founded in Inner Mongolia in 1988. It

primarily operates in the Chinese casual dining segment, specializing in Northwestern Chinese cuisine. Its founder, Jia Guolong, serves as Chairman and General Manager. As a well-known Chinese chain restaurant enterprise, Xibei has long adhered to the underlying strategy of "modernization of Chinese cuisine." The company claims to use high-quality ingredients to provide customers with a premium consumption experience, upholding its philosophy of hospitality based on quality ingredients, traditional craftsmanship, and sincere service, which has positioned it as a leader in the Chinese catering market.

On September 10, 2025, prominent Chinese internet influencer Luo Yonghao publicly questioned Xibei on Weibo after dining there, alleging that Xibei Youmian Village used a significant amount of prepared foods and was overpriced. He also called for national legislation to mandate restaurant disclosure of pre-prepared dish usage. This Weibo post sparked heated online discussion, becoming the incident's catalyst. The following day, on September 11, Xibei founder Jia Guolong responded swiftly, firmly denying the use of prepared foods and stating his intent to sue Luo Yonghao. He emphasized that pre-processing does not equate to prepared foods, attempting to distinguish between central kitchen pre-preparation and the concept of prepared foods. Subsequently, Luo Yonghao posted a reward of 100,000 RMB for evidence of Xibei's use of prepared foods, intensifying public scrutiny.

On September 12, Luo Yonghao addressed the issue via live stream, releasing a media video of a visit to a Xibei kitchen, highlighting problems such as the use of frozen ingredients in children's meals. The controversy's focus shifted to consumer rights to information and ingredient freshness, further escalating the incident. On September 13, with the draft of the "National Food Safety Standard for Prepared Foods" having passed expert review, Luo Yonghao clarified that he did not oppose prepared foods per se but stressed consumers' right to know, expressing hope for relevant national regulations. On September 14, a screenshot of Jia Guolong's remarks in an industry group chat surfaced, where he referred to Luo as a "cyber slanderer" and "cyber mafia". Luo Yonghao expressed strong disapproval in response and indicated his intent to escalate the matter, alleging that the company's response was disingenuous.

On September 15, Xibei issued a public apology, acknowledging a discrepancy between its production methods and customer expectations. The company committed to nine corrective measures to be completed by October 1, including preparing children's meals on-site, cutting and grilling lamb skewers fresh, using non-GMO soybean oil, and communicating with suppliers to shorten ingredient shelf life. Luo Yonghao subsequently dropped the lawsuit. However, the incident's negative impact on Xibei's brand image and operations persisted, manifesting in declining foot traffic and revenue. In January 2026, during an interview, Jia Guolong stated that store business had declined by approximately 50% year-on-year, and Xibei would close 102 outlets nationwide at once, constituting about 30% of its total stores.

## 5. Research Findings

### *5.1 Triggering Mechanism: The Collapse of Three-Dimensional Legitimacy and Fluctuations in Career Calling*

The three dimensions of organizational legitimacy are not isolated; rather, their collapse corresponds precisely to the three core dimensions of employee career calling: personal meaning, other-oriented meaning, and action orientation. The specific transmission mechanism unfolds as follows:

First, the collapse of corporate pragmatic legitimacy coincides with the weakening of employees' perceived personal meaning. Consumers evaluate not only whether products or services meet their practical needs but also the appropriateness of corporate activities and the alignment between the cognitive beliefs of corporate members and their own values (Chen et al., 2022). When consumers, expecting fresh cuisine, discover that the purchased products have undergone central kitchen pre-processing, their perceptions of product healthiness and freshness diminish. Viewing the company's actions as incongruent with their interests, they begin to question the product's utility, causing Xibei's pragmatic legitimacy to waver. Furthermore, following the controversy, Xibei's attempt to defend itself by citing standardized definitions of prepared foods—while overlooking consumers' long-held, ingrained perceptions of such foods—fueled further dissatisfaction. This reinforced the public's negative judgment that Xibei failed to substantively address core concerns, thereby exacerbating the erosion of pragmatic legitimacy. Given that career calling is influenced by both external and internal incentives (Duffy et al., 2018), consumer doubts regarding product quality transmit directly internally, impacting employees' career calling. Specifically, employees' pride in their products gradually erodes, and their perception of the personal meaning of their profession weakens, plunging them into a state of cognitive ambiguity characterized by self-doubt. This triggers the initial fluctuation in career calling. As employees' belief in the product's value wavers, they become unable to sincerely introduce products to consumers, leading to a decline in the initiative and persuasiveness of their service behaviors. This manifests as employees responding evasively or contradicting consumer inquiries and failing to proactively highlight core product attributes, such as craftsmanship and ingredients. Consequently, service protocols become mere formalities, product recommendations lack persuasiveness, and service initiative declines, hindering positive service experiences and brand value delivery. Since consumer perceptions of service and product experiences are mutually reinforcing, a vicious cycle emerges: "questioned product value → poor service experience → further negation of brand value." Ultimately, this leads pragmatic legitimacy to evolve from a rupture in interest alignment to a complete collapse of the trust foundation.

Second is the damage to moral legitimacy and the weakening of employees' other-oriented motivation. The deficiency in moral legitimacy fundamentally stems from the violation of promises, where organizational behavior fails to meet established social standards or norms (Islam et al., 2022). In this incident, Xibei concealed key information about product production from consumers, directly infringing on the fundamental right to information

within the context of food consumption. This rendered its brand promise of "sincere service" mere marketing rhetoric, leading consumers to protest the company's unethical conduct. Simultaneously, the use of ingredients with longer shelf lives, such as frozen broccoli, in Xibei's children's meals created a stark contrast with parents' expectations for fresh, same-day ingredients. This breached parental notions of safeguarding children's health, triggering more intense moral condemnation. Furthermore, as an industry leader in the "modernization of Chinese cuisine," Xibei's evasive stance toward the core controversy and escalation of conflict starkly contradicted the public's expectation that industry leaders should demonstrate greater social responsibility, further eroding its moral recognition at the societal level. The other-oriented meaning dimension of career calling transcends mere work significance, possessing a broader moral purpose (AI Halbusi et al., 2025). This moral condemnation is transmitted to employees, causing them to question the altruistic value of their work and diminishing their perception of other-oriented meaning. They perceive their work as not only failing to bring well-being to consumers but potentially misleading or even harming them. Consequently, employees express perfunctory apologies and explanations to customers, lacking empathy and responsibility. Internally, they grow skeptical of corporate values, becoming demotivated and unwilling to defend the brand, sometimes even internally endorsing external criticism. This cognitive rupture directly undermines the core foundation of the other-oriented meaning within their career calling, leading to the progressive weakening of their originally strong altruistic motivation. Moreover, when an individual's work environment conflicts with their mission perception, it can lead to professional alienation. Driven by self-protection, altruistic motivation within their career calling may be replaced by a mindset of self-preservation and passive coping (Pratt et al., 2006). These manifestations of moral disengagement and negative work attitudes intensify consumers' perception of the company's untrustworthiness and lack of responsibility, provoking stronger moral condemnation and public outcry. This state, in turn, further accelerates the ongoing erosion of the enterprise's moral legitimacy, ultimately evolving from partial distrust into a comprehensive moral crisis.

Finally, the erosion of cognitive legitimacy and the blurring of the significance of action orientation. On one hand, within consumers' fundamental cognition, "cooked and prepared on-site, processed in-store immediately" constitutes the core characteristic distinguishing traditional Chinese cuisine from prepared foods, representing a social consensus long established in the Chinese catering industry. However, Xibei, positioning itself as a "leader in the modernization of Chinese cuisine," employs processes such as central kitchen pre-cutting and frozen distribution. This disrupts the industry-wide consensus among consumers, weakening employees' sense of industry status and blurring the action orientation of their career calling. Consequently, the action orientation of employees' professional behavior shifts from actively communicating brand value to passively responding to skepticism. Although the public's basic conceptions regarding prepared foods formed in daily life may lack rigor, they constitute socially constructed, widespread beliefs that directly influence consumers' judgments on the appropriateness of catering products. Therefore, when Xibei attempted to address consumer doubts by invoking the technical definition of prepared foods, it ironically provoked even stronger negative feedback, further accelerating the collapse of its cognitive

legitimacy. On the other hand, leadership behavior significantly influences employees' work identity (Gerdel et al., 2025). The crisis response performance of Xibei's founder, Jia Guolong, impacted the public's overall perception of the enterprise, threatening its industry standing and consequently unsettling employees' sense of industry status. This decline in industry status and identity salience leads to a loss of confidence in corporate development and potential talent attrition, diminishing teamwork willingness and organizational belonging. Furthermore, since cognitive legitimacy tends to form a group consensus at the industry level (Bitektine et al., 2020), its impairment is more likely to trigger cognitive restructuring and trust diffusion at the group level. Consequently, employees' identity loss and behavioral withdrawal strip the enterprise of its most potent internal defenders of legitimacy, allowing negative perceptions to diffuse from individual divergence into an industry-wide trust crisis. Thus, cognitive legitimacy emerged as the core dimension of this organizational legitimacy crisis that is most difficult to repair in the short term.

In summary, the fundamental trigger of a legitimacy crisis lies in the collapse of legitimacy dimensions combined with the transmission effect of fluctuations in career calling. Specifically, a misalignment with consumer interests ruptures pragmatic legitimacy, leading to the erosion of product pride within the personal meaning dimension of employees' career calling, ultimately evolving into a collapse of the trust foundation between the enterprise and its consumers. Damage to moral legitimacy, resulting from the violation of value commitments, triggers a weakening of the other-oriented meaning within employees' career calling. Their altruistic motivation is progressively undermined, leading to a decline in work enthusiasm. The erosion of cognitive legitimacy, caused by a departure from industry consensus, results in a diminishment of employees' sense of industry status, leaving the action orientation of their career calling disoriented. These three dimensions interact and are interlinked, forming a vicious cycle of triggering: the collapse of legitimacy induces synchronous fluctuations across the three dimensions of career calling, which in turn causes behavioral disorder within the organization, thereby further exacerbating the deterioration of external legitimacy. This cycle ultimately escalates a conceptual dispute into a comprehensive legitimacy crisis. Building upon this analysis, and from the perspective of career calling, this paper proposes a "dual-loop mechanism" for legitimacy restoration.

### *5.2 Restoration Mechanism: An "Internal-External Dual-Loop" Driven by Career Calling*

This study posits that the internal loop of organizational legitimacy restoration should follow an action path of "value reshaping → institutional embedding → behavioral enactment." The primary core lies in reshaping corporate operating values. Since expectation is a necessary condition for legitimacy, legitimacy objects must align with audience expectations to gain recognition (Schoon, 2022). Therefore, corporate operating values must align with those of target audiences, integrating stakeholder expectations and social norms to foster long-term trust and support (Lim et al., 2026). To ensure sustainable operations, enterprises must look beyond profit maximization; they must return to their original aspirations, uphold quality, and consolidate their pragmatic and moral legitimacy by establishing quality assurance and integrity as core values. This provides the value foundation for cultivating employees' career calling, rebuilding their product pride and altruistic beliefs, and repairing the personal

meaning and other-oriented meaning dimensions of their calling. When corporate values align with employees' value pursuits, employees can realize self-worth, continuously enhance professional competencies, and advance their careers, thereby generating greater value for the organization (Faletehan & Wempe, 2025).

Secondly, feasible rules and regulations must be formulated to clarify employee actions and provide a favorable working environment. These measures offer institutional safeguards for the enactment of employees' career calling, remove institutional barriers, and enhance work enthusiasm. Finally, enterprises must cultivate legitimacy awareness among both management and staff through systematic training (Chen et al., 2026). A cultivation system for employees' career calling should be established to address fluctuations in career calling dimensions during crises via tiered and targeted interventions, thereby reconstructing the value connection between employees, their profession, and the enterprise. Encouraging employees to restore proactive service, sincere communication, and brand advocacy allows them to actively embody their career calling, thereby shaping a positive corporate image. This enhances external recognition and favorability toward the corporate image, ultimately facilitating the restoration of the enterprise's legitimacy.

The external loop pathway for legitimacy restoration is "consumer communication → transparency → industry standard promotion." In this crisis, a core conflict fueling consumer dissatisfaction was the stark misalignment between the enterprise's long-standing branding as a "leader in the modernization of Chinese cuisine" and its use of processes like central kitchen pre-processing in actual products, severely violating consumer expectations and infringing on their right to know, which led to product skepticism. Timely and effective communication can help enterprises rebuild trust (Kim & Arthurs, 2026). Therefore, consumer communication becomes a critical step in legitimacy restoration. By proactively informing consumers about product information, such as production techniques and actual ingredients used, enterprises can satisfy the right to know, prevent skepticism arising from information opacity, and thereby protect their pragmatic legitimacy. Furthermore, organizations can prevent the recurrence of crises by establishing supervisory bodies, which demonstrates a degree of commitment to the future and facilitates the reacquisition of stakeholder trust (Breitsohl, 2009). Consequently, a simultaneous establishment of consumer feedback mechanisms is essential. Through consumer feedback, problems can be promptly identified and resolved, effectively preventing further escalation into an operational crisis. Simultaneously, adopting transparent kitchen practices, openly showcasing production processes, reassures consumers and strengthens both cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy. Transparency mechanisms also positively constrain employee behavior, encouraging adherence to their career calling. Positive consumer feedback, in turn, enhances employees' product pride, strengthens their career calling, and fosters a beneficial virtuous cycle. Moreover, acknowledging corporate misconduct and explicitly addressing consumer moral concerns is an effective approach to repairing moral legitimacy and sustaining operations (Wei, 2026). In the face of controversy, enterprises should directly respond to consumer doubts, strategically utilize their corporate identity, and promote the development of industry standards. This helps fill industry gaps, clarifies product definitions, provides a benchmark

for product quality, and addresses skepticism stemming from differing public perceptions. By fulfilling the industry mission of a leading enterprise, it also reinforces employees' sense of industry status, improves social evaluation, and rebuilds both cognitive and moral legitimacy.

Overall, the internal loop forms the foundation for restoration, fundamentally improving and optimizing organizational management. It aims to resolve the fluctuations in employee career calling triggered by the legitimacy crisis from within the enterprise. The external loop serves as the vehicle for restoration, aiming to address public doubts about legitimacy. Internal mission consensus provides consistency for external actions, while external feedback guides internal optimization. The two loops are mutually supportive, jointly promoting the restoration of organizational legitimacy.

## 6. Conclusion

Using the Xibei prepared foods incident as a case study, this paper constructs an analytical framework by integrating career calling theory. It provides a detailed exploration of the triggering and repair mechanisms of an organizational legitimacy crisis, enriching the theoretical research on the micro-foundations of organizational legitimacy and offering practical insights for corporate legitimacy-related conduct. The study finds that the fundamental trigger of an organizational legitimacy crisis lies in the comprehensive collapse of its three core dimensions—pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy—which subsequently impairs the perception and enactment of employee career calling. Notably, career calling also exerts a reciprocal, reinforcing effect on organizational legitimacy. Based on this reciprocal effect, the study explores legitimacy restoration via two primary mechanisms: the "internal loop" and the "external loop." These mechanisms are complementary and mutually supportive, working in concert to implement legitimacy repair actions. For the organization's own sustainable development, enterprises need to adopt a long-term, benefit-oriented perspective, moving beyond a narrow focus on short-term profit. They should cultivate a management philosophy centered on integrity, quality, and the consumer. Furthermore, enterprises must emphasize the cultivation and practice of employee career calling, optimize management decision-making mechanisms, and improve internal organizational governance. When confronted with a crisis and consumer skepticism, organizations must directly address public concerns and safeguard consumer rights to information. Implementing product transparency, establishing consumer feedback channels, actively engaging in communication, solving problems through concrete actions, and consistently responding to consumer concerns are essential. Such practices continuously reinforce organizational legitimacy, enabling the enterprise to operate with integrity in the long term.

Although this study derives conclusions through theoretical integration and in-depth case analysis, certain limitations remain. First, this study selected only the Xibei prepared foods incident as a single case, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to some extent. Although Xibei is a leading enterprise in China's catering industry and its case possesses a degree of representativeness, different types of crisis events faced by enterprises of different scales and across various industries may exhibit distinct mechanisms for triggering and

repairing legitimacy. Therefore, future research could adopt a multiple-case approach, selecting crisis events from different catering enterprises, the retail industry, manufacturing, and finance for cross-case analysis. By comparing their differences and commonalities, researchers can verify the findings and enhance the universal applicability of the conclusions. Second, the data sources for this study were primarily secondary materials integrated from public channels such as online media and corporate statements. The absence of empirical data, such as first-hand interviews or questionnaires from enterprise managers, frontline employees, and consumers, makes it difficult to directly and effectively observe the psychological fluctuations and behavioral responses regarding employees' career calling during the incident. Future research should collect qualitative and quantitative data through longitudinal tracking to capture the interactive process among the evolution of the legitimacy crisis, fluctuations in employees' career calling, and organizational restoration behaviors in real-time, thereby enhancing the precision and persuasiveness of the mechanism analysis.

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### **Author contributions**

Chunqing Xie drafted and revised the manuscript; Xinqi Zhong was responsible for case collection, research design, and revision; Wenjie Yang was responsible for research design and revision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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