

Perspective

Localising human resource management paradoxes: Developmental maturity and the maturation tree of inclusive shared value

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Abstract: Human resource management (HRM) systems are expected to deliver flexibility and consistency, efficiency and fairness, and short-term productivity and long-term capability simultaneously. Paradox theory explains why such contradictory yet interdependent demands persist, but emphasises the pervasiveness of tension rather than its distribution, offering little guidance on where tension becomes acute enough to warrant scarce attention. Contingency theory and strategic fit address location, but have modelled fit as a condition assessed at a single moment; recent dynamic-alignment and HR-ecosystem work relaxes that assumption without specifying where tension concentrates. This conceptual paper generalises to HRM the Maturation Tree of Inclusive Shared Value (MTISV), which joins contingency and paradox reasoning to locate developmental discontinuities in producer-centred systems. Transferred to the employment relationship, it yields a paradox localisation: HRM paradoxes become salient at interfaces where interdependent practices have developed to divergent levels of maturity. Developmental maturity (the state of a practice, not of the people it governs) is proposed as a dynamic contingency governing whether a contradiction remains latent or becomes salient. Six propositions and an integrated model specify when and where paradoxes localise; the argument is operationalised as the HR Maturity Diagnostic Framework (HRMDF), a six-stage procedure mapping interdependence, comparing maturity and sequencing intervention; and five recurring paradoxes are localised to named interfaces. The Rwandan coffee illustration draws on MTISV's published foundations and does not test the framework. The propositions remain untested and the maturity levels and synchronisation thresholds provisional, requiring construct development and calibration; boundary conditions and a validation agenda are set out.

Keywords: paradox theory; paradox localisation; developmental maturity; contingency theory; strategic fit; strategic human resource management.

1. Introduction

Human resource management has evolved from an administrative support function into a strategic capability expected to promote employee well-being, organisational competitiveness, innovation, sustainability and long-term value creation (Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Guest, 2011). These objectives rarely advance in harmony. Organisations confront competing yet interdependent demands: flexibility versus consistency, efficiency versus fairness, standardisation versus individualisation, and short-term productivity versus long-term capability. Such tensions are increasingly understood not as temporary dilemmas that disappear once the right structure is found, but as enduring features of organisational life (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Keegan et al., 2019).

Paradox theory is the principal lens for understanding them. It conceptualises tensions as paradoxes—contradictory yet interrelated demands that persist and

cannot be resolved through simple trade-offs (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). The literature has advanced understanding of why contradictions endure and how organisations sustain rather than eliminate them (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Putnam et al., 2016). Its dominant framing, however, is that paradox is a pervasive condition of organising. That framing is analytically productive but managerially incomplete: it does not, on its own, indicate where in an interdependent system a standing contradiction becomes acute enough to justify the allocation of finite attention, budget and political capital. For a manager, locating a fairness tension at the boundary between appraisal and reward is more actionable than the general observation that fairness tensions pervade the organisation.

Contingency theory and the strategic-fit tradition address location from a different angle, holding that effectiveness depends on the fit between practices and their context, and that misfit degrades performance (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Donaldson, 2001; Delery and Doty, 1996). This tradition can indicate where alignment is weak, but it has typically modelled fit as a structural property assessed at a single moment, and so has struggled to account for tensions that endure after structural realignment.

It would overstate the case to say that paradox theory addresses only persistence and contingency theory only location. The contrast is one of emphasis rather than of absolute presence or absence, and several literatures already work across both dimensions. Research on HR system strength specifies how the signalling properties of an HR system shape whether employees experience it as coherent (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). Work on horizontal fit and HR bundling analyses consistency among practices rather than only between practices and strategy (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall and Macky, 2009). The HR-ecosystem literature has explicitly reframed fit and alignment as processual and distributed rather than static (Snell and Morris, 2021; Snell et al., 2023; Donnelly and Hughes, 2023; Ouyang et al., 2026), and process-oriented paradox research examines how tensions co-evolve over time (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). These literatures still under-specify a single, portable mechanism that predicts *which* interface in a given HR system will carry acute tension, and *why* that tension persists after structural correction. That is the narrower gap this paper addresses.

The paper takes up that gap by drawing on the Maturation Tree of Inclusive Shared Value (MTISV), a diagnostic framework developed to assess how value is recognised and distributed along developmental interfaces in producer-centred systems (Nkurunziza, 2026; see also Nkurunziza, 2025; Nkurunziza, in press). Generalising its developmental logic to the employment relationship, the paper proposes the principle of paradox localisation: HRM paradoxes become salient at interfaces where interdependent HR practices have developed to different levels of maturity. Developmental maturity is proposed as a dynamic contingency—a moving rather than fixed condition of fit—governing when a latent tension is experienced as a paradox.

1.1. Contributions

The paper makes four contributions, each advanced as a conceptual claim rather than an empirical finding. First, it carries into HRM a developmental account in which contingency and paradox reasoning are already reconciled, and positions maturity divergence as a candidate mechanism linking structural fit to paradox salience. Second, it specifies the constructs of that account—developmental maturity, maturity divergence, latent and salient paradox, developmental synchronisation, and paradox localisation—and distinguishes each from adjacent constructs in the HRM literature. Third, it advances six

propositions and an integrated model stating when and where paradoxes are expected to localise, together with the observations that would support or disconfirm each. Fourth, it operationalises the argument as a diagnostic procedure, the HRMDF, that offers managers a structured way to form and challenge hypotheses about where to intervene first, in place of an injunction to balance all tensions everywhere.

1.2. The epistemic status of the argument

Since the paper advances a framework and not a test of one, it is important to state at the outset what kind of claim each element makes. The paper mixes three registers: findings established in prior literature, propositions advanced here for future testing, and instruments offered as provisional conceptual tools. Conflating them would overstate the framework's warrant. **Table 1** therefore states the status of each element explicitly, and the paper's language is calibrated to it throughout: established findings are cited, propositions are labelled as such, and the diagnostic instruments are described as provisional. In particular, the five maturity levels and the numerical thresholds of the synchronisation matrix are heuristic devices for organising comparative judgement. They are not validated measurement instruments, and no claim is made that they possess demonstrated reliability, validity or calibrated cut-off points.

Table 1. Epistemic status of the elements of the framework.

Element	Status	What is and is not claimed
Interdependence of HR practices	Established in prior literature	Well supported that HR practices are systemically interrelated (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Jiang et al., 2012; Ostroff and Bowen, 2016).
Persistence of HRM tensions	Established in prior literature	Well supported that contradictory demands endure (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Keegan et al., 2019).
MTISV developmental logic in producer-centred systems	Established in the source framework	Grounded in prior published qualitative work (Nkurunziza, 2026); its transfer to HRM is the present paper's proposal, not an established result.
Paradox localisation (P1)	Proposition, untested	Advanced as a testable claim about where salience concentrates; not demonstrated.
Divergence–salience relationship (P2, P4)	Proposition, untested	Directional expectation only; no functional form, effect size or threshold is claimed.
Synchronisation and sequencing effects (P3, P5)	Proposition, untested	Comparative-effectiveness claim requiring longitudinal or quasi-experimental evidence.
Mediation of fit–outcome relationship (P6)	Proposition, untested	No mediation analysis has been conducted; stated as a hypothesis for future research.
The five maturity levels	Provisional conceptual tool	A comparative ordinal language for judgement; not a validated scale. Reliability and validity remain to be established.
The synchronisation matrix thresholds	Provisional conceptual tool	Ordinal bands illustrating a monotonic expectation; cut-off points are illustrative and require empirical calibration.
The six-stage HRMDF procedure	Provisional conceptual tool	A structured analytical protocol; its diagnostic accuracy and inter-assessor reliability are untested.
The Rwandan coffee material	Illustrative application	Draws on previously published sources to show the transferability of the developmental mechanism; it is not an empirical test of the HRM framework.
The five localised paradoxes	Illustrative typology	Plausible mappings derived from the literature; neither exhaustive nor empirically confirmed.

Source: Author's own creation.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and states the gap, and Section 3 specifies the transfer from MTISV to HRM. Section 4 defines the constructs and their boundaries, and

Section 5 states the propositions. Section 6 operationalises the framework as the HRMDF, and Section 7 offers the illustrative application. Section 8 specifies boundary conditions, and Sections 9 to 12 discuss implications, limitations and conclusions.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. HRM as a system of interdependent practices

Contemporary HRM is best understood not as a set of discrete practices but as an interdependent system in which recruitment, development, performance management, rewards, careers and governance shape one another (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Jiang et al., 2012; Ostroff and Bowen, 2016; Becker and Huselid, 2006; Boselie et al., 2005). Because these practices serve partly competing purposes, the system is prone to tension: strengthening one practice frequently intensifies pressure on another. Early duality perspectives recognised this, framing HRM as the ongoing management of opposing yet necessary demands rather than the optimisation of a single objective (Evans, 1999; Paauwe, 2004; Guest, 1997; Legge, 2005).

This interdependence is structured rather than incidental. Recruitment feeds workforce planning; performance management feeds reward and development; leadership practices are bounded by governance. The HR system therefore behaves less like a portfolio of independent levers than like a network in which the state of one node constrains its neighbours (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). Such accounts do not, however, supply a rule for determining which of the many tensions in a given network will surface as pressing problems.

2.2. Paradox theory: the persistence of contradictory demands

Paradox theory conceptualises persistent tensions as contradictory yet interdependent elements that coexist and endure (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Its dynamic-equilibrium model explains how organisations sustain competing demands through cyclical responses rather than permanent resolution, and how defensive reactions such as splitting, suppression or oscillation arise when actors experience tensions as threatening (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The perspective has been extended to innovation, ambidexterity and sustainability (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Hahn et al., 2018) and consolidated into a broad research programme (Schad et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2016), including within HRM, where tensions are treated as endemic to strategic HR systems (Donnelly and Hughes, 2023; Duggan et al., 2020) and where systematic review has shown the tensions surrounding the HR function itself to be a defining continuity across five decades of research (Cayrat and Boxall, 2023).

Paradox scholarship distinguishes several recurring types—performing, organising, belonging and learning tensions—arising respectively from competing goals, structures, identities and temporal horizons (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Härtel and Krzeminska, 2024). This typology answers *what kind* of tension is at issue. It does not, by construction, answer *where* in an interdependent HR system that tension will be felt most acutely, since the same performing paradox may surface at very different points in two otherwise similar organisations. Micro-level work on paradox mindset has shown that the same objective tension is experienced very differently by different actors (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), which sharpens rather than resolves the question of location: if experience varies, an account is needed of the systemic conditions under which it varies.

2.3. Contingency theory, strategic fit and its dynamic extensions

Contingency theory holds that effectiveness depends on alignment between

organisational elements and their context (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Donaldson, 2001). In strategic HRM it underpins the proposition that HR systems contribute to performance when they fit the organisation's strategy and internal architecture (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Boxall, 2012; Minbaeva and Navrbjerg, 2023). Strategic HRM has elaborated fit into vertical fit between HR and strategy and horizontal fit among HR practices themselves (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall and Macky, 2009). Horizontal fit is the more pertinent here, since it concerns the internal consistency of interdependent practices.

Two further developments bear on the present argument. First, work on HR system strength shifts attention from the content of practices to the properties (distinctiveness, consistency and consensus) that make an HR system legible to employees (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). This is an account of how contradiction is experienced, and is therefore closely related to what is called salience below. Second, the HR-ecosystem literature explicitly rejects fit as a static state, analysing alignment as an emergent and continually renegotiated process distributed across multiple actors (Snell and Morris, 2021; Snell et al., 2023; Donnelly and Hughes, 2023), including longitudinal accounts of movement from static fit through misalignment to dynamic alignment (Ouyang et al., 2026).

These developments substantially narrow the gap this paper addresses, and the paper's contribution should be understood as incremental with respect to them. Horizontal fit asks whether coupled practices are consistent; it does not ask whether they are consistent *because they have developed to comparable stages*, and it assesses consistency at a moment instead of as a rate. HR system strength explains how employees read an HR system as a whole; it does not predict which specific interface within that system will generate the incoherence they read. The HR-ecosystem literature establishes that alignment is dynamic and distributed, but treats misalignment largely as an emergent property of a configuration *rather* than as a quantity attributable to a nameable pair of practices.

2.4. The residual gap

The gap is therefore narrower and more specific than a wholesale opposition between two literatures. The literature lacks a construct that is simultaneously (i) structural, in that it attaches tension to an identifiable pair of practices rather than to the system as a whole; (ii) developmental, in that it explains persistence as a consequence of continuing uneven maturation rather than of a one-off design error; and (iii) portable, in that it can be applied to any HR system without prior knowledge of its sector or configuration. This paper proposes that developmental maturity—the degree to which an HR practice has become institutionalised, integrated and strategically embedded—is a candidate for that construct. When interdependent practices mature unevenly, the interface between them is proposed to become a site of persistent, locatable paradox. This proposal preserves paradox theory's claim that contradictions are permanent while adding the contingency-theoretic claim that their expression is patterned and locatable. Because maturation is continuous, the map of salient paradoxes is not fixed but shifts as practices advance, which is why a single structural redesign is not expected to settle matters. **Table 2** situates the developmental perspective against the four positions reviewed above.

Table 2. Positioning the developmental perspective against adjacent perspectives.

Perspective	Central question	Unit of analysis	Treatment of fit	Managerial implication	What it leaves open
Classical HRM	Which practice is best in itself?	The individual practice	Best practice; one optimum	Adopt the superior practice	Treats contradictions as dilemmas to be solved
Contingency / strategic fit	Where is alignment weak?	Organisation and structure	Static structural correspondence	Correct the misfit	Why tension persists after realignment
HR system strength	How is the system experienced?	The HR system as a signalling device	Coherence as a perceptual property	Send distinctive, consistent, consensual signals	Which specific interface generates the incoherence
HR ecosystem / dynamic alignment	How does alignment evolve?	Ecosystem of actors	Processual and distributed	Continuously renegotiate alignment	Which nameable pair of practices carries the tension
Paradox theory	Why do tensions persist?	Contradictory demands	Not a fit construct; dynamic coexistence	Embrace and sustain the tension	Where, in a given system, tension becomes acute
Developmental maturity (this paper)	Where does tension become acute, and why does it endure?	The interface between two coupled practices	Dynamic developmental synchronisation	Localise, then sequence maturation	Measurement and empirical validation (Table 1)

Source: Author's own creation.

3. From MTISV to HRM: specifying the transfer

3.1. What MTISV establishes

MTISV was developed to analyse how value is created, recognised and distributed along interdependent stages of a producer-centred system, and to diagnose where developmental discontinuities impede shared value (Nkurunziza, 2026). It responds to a long-standing critique that shared-value accounts describe the creation of value more convincingly than its distribution (Porter and Kramer, 2011; Crane et al., 2014; Dembek et al., 2016). Its central claim is that interdependent components rarely mature at the same rate, and that the resulting developmental gaps—rather than the components themselves—are where value is lost and tension concentrates.

The mechanism MTISV foregrounds is recognition across interfaces: value is realised only when the output of one developed stage is adequately received by the next. Where a downstream stage has not matured enough to absorb an upstream advance, the surplus is dissipated rather than shared.

3.2. What is inherited and what is new

The present paper builds on the author's earlier work, so the boundary between the two must be explicit. Three elements are inherited from MTISV: the developmental premise that interdependent components mature at uneven rates; the interface premise that loss concentrates at the boundary between a developed and a less-developed component; and the ordinal logic of maturation as a comparative rather than normative scale. Four elements are new to this paper and constitute its contribution to HRM. First, the unit of analysis changes from a stage in a producer-centred value chain to an HR practice within an employment relationship, which changes what maturation consists of and what the interface transmits. Second, the outcome variable changes from value loss to paradox salience, which requires an explicit account of how a structural gap becomes a subjectively experienced and behaviourally consequential contradiction. Third, the paper connects the developmental mechanism to paradox theory's latent/salient distinction, which has no counterpart in MTISV. Fourth, it derives from that connection a sequencing rule and a six-stage diagnostic protocol specific to HR systems, together with a mapping of five recurring HRM paradoxes onto named

interfaces.

Table 3 presents both the structural correspondence between the two formulations and the status of each element, distinguishing the parts of the argument that are carried over from those advanced here.

Table 3. The transfer from MTISV to HRM: structural correspondence and incremental contribution.

MTISV formulation (producer-centred system)	HRM formulation (this paper)	Status
Stage in a value chain (cultivation, processing, quality assessment, market access)	HR practice (recruitment, L&D, performance management, rewards, careers, governance)	Transferred with a changed unit of analysis
Functional dependence between successive stages	Functional coupling between HR practices, where the output of one is an input to the other	Inherited premise
Uneven maturation of stages	Uneven developmental maturity of practices	Inherited premise
Developmental discontinuity between adjacent stages	Maturity divergence across an interface	Inherited premise, renamed and made quantitative as a pairwise absolute difference
Failure of recognition: an upstream advance is not absorbed downstream	Precise upstream signals meet an unresponsive downstream practice (e.g. differentiated appraisal meets undifferentiated pay)	Transferred and specified for the employment relationship
Value loss or non-shared surplus	Paradox salience: an experienced, behaviourally consequential contradiction	New** —the outcome construct is changed, requiring an account of subjective experience absent from MTISV
—	Latent versus salient paradox; synchronisation as the condition keeping a contradiction latent	New** —connects the developmental mechanism to paradox theory
Diagnosis of discontinuities in a chain	Six-stage HRMDF protocol with a sequencing rule (raise the laggard, close the widest feasible gap first)	New** —protocol and decision rule specific to HR systems
—	Mapping of five recurring HRM paradoxes to named interfaces	New** —HRM-specific typology

Source: Author's own creation.

3.3. Why the transfer is a generalisation rather than a metaphor

The basis for the proposed transfer is that the employment relationship reproduces the structural conditions the mechanism requires: a set of components whose outputs are inputs to one another, differential rates of development across those components, and a boundary at which a mismatch cannot be absorbed internally. HR practices are the stages through which employee contribution is developed, recognised and rewarded, and they mature unevenly for the same reason value-chain stages do—attention, investment and learning are distributed unequally. In both settings, interdependence is the architecture that converts divergence into experienced tension at identifiable points (Lepak et al., 2007). The content of maturation does not transfer: in a value chain it concerns physical and market capability, whereas in an HR system it concerns institutionalisation, integration and strategic embedding. Section 6.2 specifies the latter.

4. The conceptual framework: constructs and boundaries

This section defines the framework's constructs, states their level of analysis and distinguishes each from the adjacent constructs with which it might be confused. Terminology is used consistently throughout the remainder of the paper as defined here, and **Table 4** summarises the definitions.

4.1. Developmental maturity

Developmental maturity denotes the degree to which an HR practice has moved from informal, ad hoc activity toward institutionalised, integrated and strategically embedded operation. The construct is bounded in two respects. First, the construct is a property of a practice, not of a person: it does not refer

to employee development, career maturity, workforce capability or managerial competence, and a practice may be highly mature in a workforce that is not, or vice versa. Second, it is not a quality judgement about the practice's design. A well-designed appraisal instrument that is applied inconsistently and is disconnected from other practices is developmentally immature in this sense, whatever its technical merit.

Unlike static notions of fit, maturity is a moving property: practices advance at different speeds depending on managerial attention, investment and learning (Crossan et al., 1999; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Reconceiving fit in these terms turns contingency into a dynamic condition. Alignment is no longer a state an organisation attains and holds, but a relationship between practices that are themselves developing.

Maturity advances through organisational learning, as routines are codified, feedback is incorporated and knowledge is integrated, and as practices become embedded in structure and culture (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Crossan et al., 1999; Schein, 2010; Cameron and Quinn, 2006; Felin et al., 2012). Because learning is distributed and locally driven, some practices professionalise quickly while others lag. An uneven maturity profile is therefore the default condition of a developing system, not an aberration to be designed away, and this is why the tensions it generates persist.

4.2. Interdependence and the interface

An interface is the shared boundary between two practices that are functionally coupled, meaning that the output of one is a systematic input to the other. Where practices are so coupled, a difference in their maturity cannot be absorbed internally and surfaces at that boundary (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Jiang et al., 2012). Practices that are only loosely coupled can mature independently without generating paradox.

Performance management and rewards illustrate the point. If appraisal becomes sophisticated, with calibrated ratings, rich feedback and differentiated judgements, while reward remains a flat, seniority-based scheme, the interface cannot reconcile the two: precise performance signals meet undifferentiated outcomes. The tension lies not in appraisal or reward considered separately, each defensible on its own terms, but in the gap between their levels of development.

4.3. Maturity divergence

Maturity divergence is the absolute difference in developmental maturity across a given interface. It is a property of a pair of practices, not of a practice or of a system, and it is directional in interpretation even though it is computed as an absolute value: it matters which of the two practices is ahead, because that determines which one should be raised. Divergence is distinct from misfit in the contingency sense, which is a discrepancy between a practice and an external referent such as strategy or environment. Two practices may both fit the strategy well and still diverge sharply from each other.

4.4. Latent and salient paradox

A latent paradox is a standing contradiction that is not currently experienced as a problem, because the interface across which it would surface is synchronised. A salient paradox is one that has become visible and consequential because divergence has opened that interface. Management does not eliminate the contradiction, which is impossible, but governs its salience by governing divergence.

Salience requires more precise specification than the term ordinarily carries, since it is the framework's dependent construct. It is used here to denote a

compound condition with three manifestations, which are expected to appear in a rough sequence as divergence widens. The first is *experiential*: employees or managers report the contradiction as a felt difficulty—perceived unfairness, blocked progression, unsupported discretion. The second is *behavioural*: actors adopt defensive or compensatory responses, including the splitting, suppression and oscillation described by paradox theory (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000), together with workarounds and informal local rules. The third is *systemic*: patterned dysfunction appears in organisational indicators such as regretted attrition among high performers, grievance volume, or the abandonment of formal processes. A paradox is described here as fully salient when all three are present; where only the experiential manifestation is observed, the paradox is emerging rather than acute. This specification matters practically, because it identifies what a diagnosis should look for and, as Section 6.7 notes, it also creates a risk of circularity that measurement design must address.

4.5. Developmental synchronisation

The framework reinterprets strategic fit as developmental synchronisation: the degree to which interdependent practices occupy comparable maturity levels. Where classical fit asks whether practices align with strategy, synchronisation asks whether coupled practices are developing together. This shifts the managerial question from static alignment to coordinated maturation, and makes fit a property of relationships between developing practices rather than of the system as a whole.

Synchronisation sits close to several established constructs, so its distinctiveness must be stated and not assumed. It differs from horizontal fit in being developmental and rate-based instead of content-based: two practices may be consistent in content while one is institutionalised and the other is not. It differs from HR system strength in level and in kind: system strength is constitutively perceptual, in that it consists in how employees read the system as a whole, whereas synchronisation is a structural relational property of a specific pair that obtains whether or not anyone perceives it, though establishing it remains, as Section 6.2 makes clear, a matter of evidenced judgement and not of measurement. The framework proposes the latter as one antecedent of the former, and it is this difference in kind that allows the two to be evidenced separately (Section 6.7). It differs from HR coherence and bundling in that coherence is typically assessed as a configuration at a moment, whereas synchronisation is assessed as a relative developmental position and can change without any practice being redesigned. And it differs from dynamic alignment in the ecosystem sense by attaching misalignment to a nameable pair rather than treating it as an emergent property of a distributed configuration. **Table 5** summarises these distinctions.

Synchronisation also reframes familiar HR problems. Change fatigue often reflects practices pushed to advanced maturity faster than their neighbours can follow; policy–practice gaps often mark interfaces where a strategically mature intention meets an operationally immature process. Diagnosing these as synchronisation failures redirects attention from the visibly weak practice to the interface where the gap is felt.

4.6. Paradox localisation

Paradox localisation is the analytic operation the framework performs: tracing an experienced tension to the interface whose divergence is proposed to produce it, rather than to either coupled practice alone. It is an inferential act, not a property of the system, and it is defeasible—a localisation is a hypothesis that can be wrong, and Section 6.7 sets out the conditions under which it is most likely to be. The underlying contradiction is not created at the interface; the interface concentrates it at a specific, identifiable point where one practice has outpaced another that depends on it. Paradoxes, on this reading, are patterned by

the developmental geography of the HR system, occurring neither at random nor evenly across it.

Table 4. Core constructs: definitions, level of analysis and boundaries.

Construct	Definition	Level of analysis	What it is not
Developmental maturity	The degree to which an HR practice has moved from informal, ad hoc activity toward institutionalised, integrated and strategically embedded operation	A single HR practice	Not employee development, career maturity or workforce capability; not a judgement of the practice's technical design quality
Interface	The shared boundary between two functionally coupled practices, where the output of one is a systematic input to the other	A pair of practices	Not any co-occurrence of two practices; loose coupling does not constitute an interface
Maturity divergence	The absolute difference in developmental maturity across an interface	A pair of practices	Not misfit against an external referent such as strategy; not the weakness of either practice
Latent paradox	A standing contradiction not currently experienced, because the interface is synchronised	A pair of practices	Not the absence of contradiction; the contradiction remains permanently present
Salient paradox	A contradiction that is experienced, behaviourally consequential, and systemically visible because divergence has opened the interface	Employee experience, behaviour and system indicators	Not merely a strong tension; requires manifestation, not just structural potential
Developmental synchronisation	The condition in which coupled practices occupy comparable maturity levels, keeping their contradiction latent	A pair of practices	Not overall system coherence; not equality of quality; not the maximisation of every practice
Paradox localisation	The analytic tracing of an experienced tension to the divergent interface proposed to produce it	The diagnostic act	Not attribution to a single practice; not a confirmed causal identification
Developmental sequencing	The ordering of intervention so that the widest, most feasible gaps close first, by raising the laggard	The intervention plan	Not system-wide balancing; not advancing the already-leading practice

Source: Author's own creation.

Table 5. Developmental synchronisation distinguished from adjacent constructs.

Adjacent construct	What it asks	How developmental synchronisation differs
Vertical fit (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2016)	Do HR practices align with organisational strategy?	Synchronisation is internal and relational: two practices may each align with strategy while diverging sharply from each other
Horizontal fit / bundling (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall and Macky, 2009)	Are HR practices mutually consistent in content?	Synchronisation compares developmental stage instead of content, and is assessed as relative position rather than as configuration at a moment
HR system strength (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff and Bowen, 2016)	Is the HR system distinctive, consistent and consensual as employees read it?	System strength is constitutively perceptual, consisting in how employees read the whole; synchronisation is a structural relational property of a specific pair that obtains independently of perception, though it is established by evidenced judgement rather than measurement
Dynamic alignment / HR ecosystem (Snell and Morris, 2021; Snell et al., 2023; Ouyang et al., 2026)	How does alignment emerge and evolve across distributed actors?	Synchronisation attaches misalignment to a nameable pair of practices and specifies a magnitude, rather than treating it as an emergent configurational property

Source: Author's own creation.

4.7. The integrated framework

These elements combine into the framework shown in **Figure 1**. Interdependent HR practices, each at its own level of developmental maturity,

meet at interfaces; where maturity diverges across an interface, the associated paradox is proposed to become salient and, if unmanaged, to elicit defensive responses and impaired outcomes. Developmental synchronisation, understood as deliberately bringing coupled practices to comparable maturity in sequence, is proposed to keep the paradox latent.

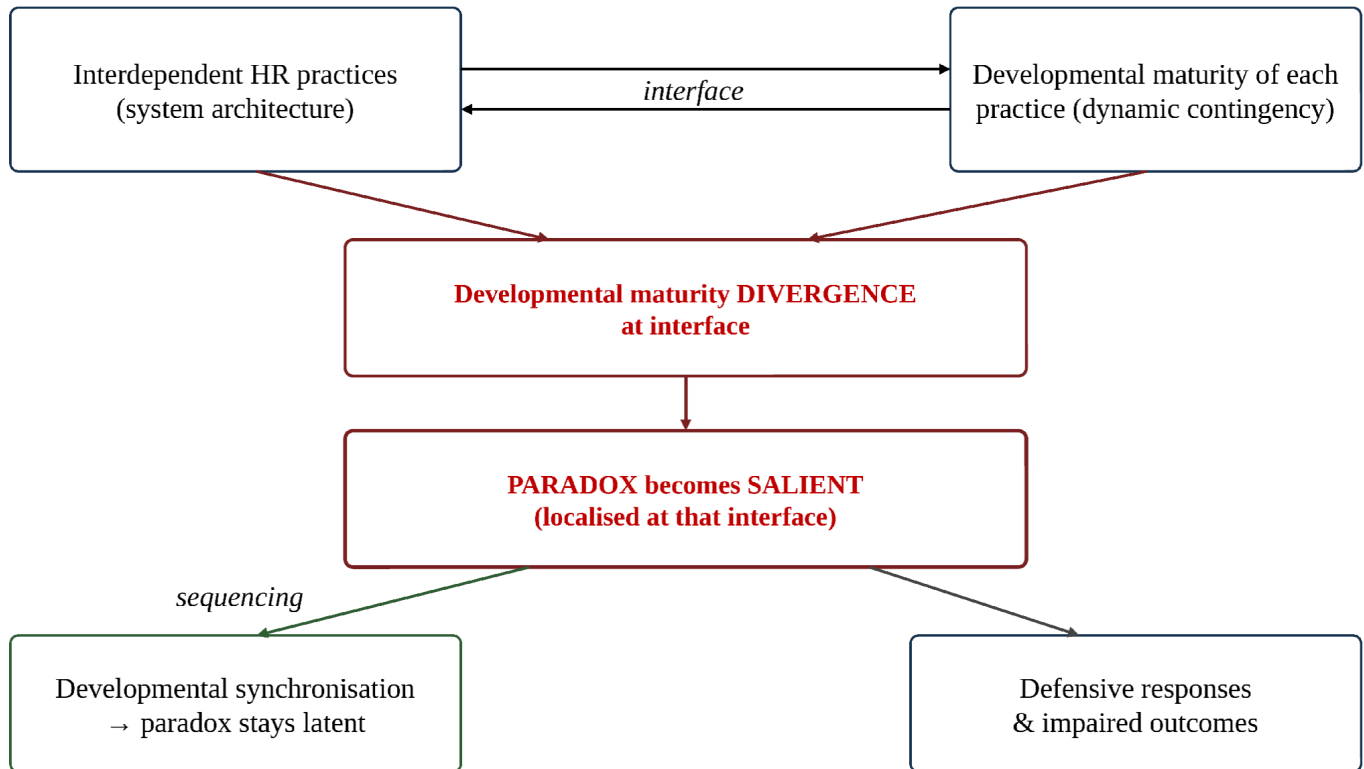


Figure 1. The integrated conceptual framework: paradoxes are proposed to become salient where interdependent HR practices reach divergent developmental maturity; synchronisation keeps them latent.

Source: Author's own creation.

5. Theoretical propositions

Consistent with conceptual theory-building, the following propositions specify testable relationships rather than confirmed findings (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989). None has been tested here. The first three concern the antecedents of paradox salience, the fourth and fifth its management, and the sixth its consequences for organisational outcomes. For each, the observations that would count as support or as disconfirmation are stated, so that the claims are falsifiable rather than merely plausible. The complete model is depicted in **Figure 2** and summarised in **Table 6**.

Proposition 1. *HR paradoxes become salient at interfaces between interdependent HR practices, rather than being uniformly distributed across the HR system.*

Because contradictions are transmitted through interdependence, the location of salient paradox should be predictable from the system's architecture. Tightly coupled practices are expected to concentrate tension at their shared boundary, whereas loosely coupled practices dissipate it (Lepak and Snell, 1999). The proposition would be disconfirmed if experienced tension were distributed independently of coupling structure, or if it clustered as strongly around loosely coupled pairs as around tightly coupled ones.

Proposition 2. *The greater the developmental-maturity divergence across an interface, the greater the salience of the associated paradox.*

Divergence is proposed as the continuous driver of salience: comparable maturity keeps a contradiction latent, while a widening gap renders it acute. This positions developmental maturity as a dynamic contingency governing tension

(Donaldson, 2001; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Only a monotonic relationship is claimed; no functional form, effect size or threshold is asserted, and the ordinal bands in Section 6.4 are illustrative of the expected direction rather than predictions of magnitude. The proposition would be disconfirmed if salience were unrelated to divergence once the absolute maturity level of the weaker practice is controlled.

Proposition 3. *Developmental synchronisation maintains paradoxes in a latent rather than salient state.*

Where coupled practices advance together, their contradiction is continuously absorbed and is not expected to crystallise into an experienced paradox. Synchronisation is therefore proposed as a preventive condition, not a resolution (Evans, 1999). Disconfirmation would take the form of interfaces that remain synchronised yet exhibit persistently high salience, indicating that some other mechanism is at work.

Proposition 4. *Defensive responses concentrate at high-divergence interfaces.*

Because actors are expected to experience the sharpest contradictions where maturity gaps are widest, the splitting, suppression and oscillation described by paradox theory should cluster at those interfaces rather than spreading evenly (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000). Disconfirmation would follow from finding defensive responses distributed evenly across interfaces irrespective of divergence.

Proposition 5. *Sequencing development to close the widest maturity gaps first reduces paradox salience more effectively than system-wide balancing.*

If salience is driven by specific gaps, targeted, ordered maturation should yield greater relief per unit of effort than diffuse attempts to balance all tensions at once. This reframes paradox management as prioritised development, consistent with ambidexterity accounts of sequenced and balanced pursuit of competing activities (March, 1991; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). This is a comparative-effectiveness claim and requires longitudinal or quasi-experimental evidence; it is the proposition most vulnerable to selection effects, since organisations that sequence well may differ systematically from those that do not.

Proposition 6. *Developmental maturity mediates the relationship between HR system fit and organisational outcomes.*

Fit is proposed to improve outcomes to the extent that interdependent practices mature in a coordinated way; where maturity diverges, the benefits of nominal fit are expected to be absorbed by paradox at the interfaces (Jiang et al., 2012; Guest, 2011). This mediation has not been tested, and it is stated here as a hypothesis rather than as a mechanism the paper demonstrates. Testing it requires at minimum a measure of synchronisation independent of both fit and outcomes, and a design capable of establishing temporal ordering.

Taken together, the propositions describe a single developmental process rather than six separate claims. Architecture is proposed to govern where contradictions can localise (P1); divergence governs whether and how strongly they do so (P2, P4); synchronisation and sequencing govern how they are managed (P3, P5); and coordinated maturation governs what the system ultimately achieves (P6). The model is recursive, since outcomes feed back into the attention and investment that drive further maturation, so synchronisation is sustained through continuous diagnosis rather than achieved once.

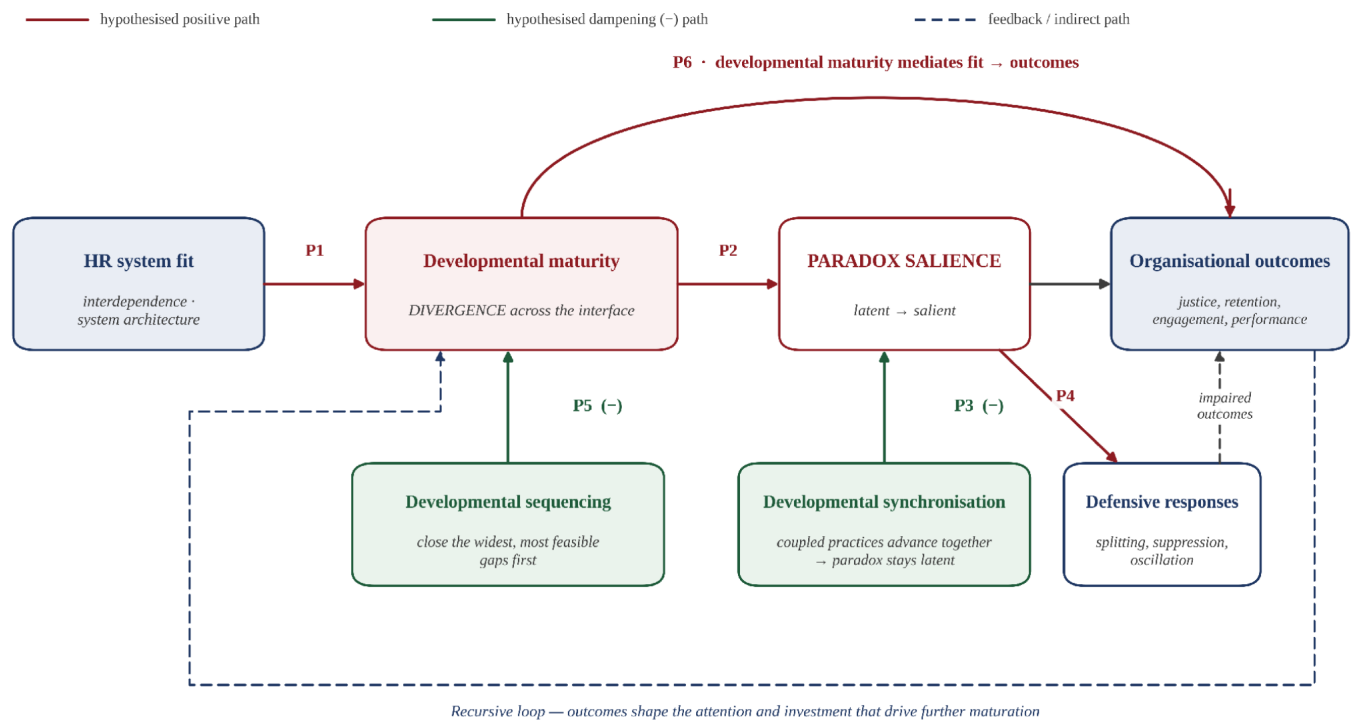


Figure 2. The complete theoretical model. Developmental maturity divergence is proposed to mediate the relationship between HR system fit and organisational outcomes (P6); paradoxes localise at high-divergence interfaces (P1, P2); defensive responses concentrate there (P4); and synchronisation and sequencing dampen salience (P3, P5). All paths are hypothesised and untested.

Source: Author's own creation.

Table 6. Summary of theoretical propositions, their status and the evidence that would test them.

Proposition	Core theoretical argument	Primary contribution	Status	Evidence that would test it
P1	Paradoxes become salient at interfaces between interdependent practices	Localisation principle	Untested	Mapping perceived tension against independently coded coupling structure across multiple organisations
P2	Maturity divergence increases paradox salience	Developmental contingency	Untested; direction only	Cross-sectional association between pairwise maturity gaps and interface-level salience measures, controlling for absolute maturity
P3	Synchronisation maintains paradoxes in a latent state	Dynamic equilibrium	Untested	Longitudinal comparison of interfaces that remain synchronised with those that diverge
P4	Defensive responses cluster at high-divergence interfaces	Behavioural implication	Untested	Observational or diary evidence linking defensive behaviour to specific interfaces
P5	Sequenced closure of widest gaps outperforms system-wide balancing	Managerial strategy	Untested; comparative claim	Quasi-experimental or matched-case comparison of sequencing versus simultaneous intervention
P6	Developmental maturity mediates fit and outcomes	Theory integration	Untested; hypothesis only	Multi-wave mediation design with independent measures of fit, synchronisation and outcomes

Source: Author's own creation.

6. Operationalising the framework: the HR Maturity Diagnostic Framework

6.1. From conceptual to diagnostic theory, and the status of the instrument

A conceptual framework becomes useful to managers when it can be applied. The paradox-localisation logic translates into a diagnostic procedure: if paradoxes concentrate at high-divergence interfaces, then locating those interfaces is a tractable analytical task. Doing so requires a common language for describing

how far each practice has developed, so that maturity can be compared across an interface rather than judged in isolation (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016; Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

The instrument described below is provisional, and that status matters for how its outputs should be read. The HRMDF structures judgement; it does not measure. Its levels are anchored ordinal descriptors and not a validated scale, its thresholds heuristic bands and not calibrated cut-off points, and its output is a set of ranked hypotheses about where intervention is likely to yield the most relief, not an identification of actual causes. Used as intended, it makes an assessor's reasoning explicit and contestable, which is its main present value, and it generates the interface-level predictions that would allow the propositions in Section 5 to be tested. If it were instead treated as a measurement instrument, it would attribute to the framework a warrant it does not yet possess.

6.2. The five maturity levels and the three lenses of assessment

The five levels—Emerging, Developing, Integrated, Strategic and Adaptive—describe successive qualitative shifts in how a practice operates, not equal increments on a metric. Their conceptual basis is the organisational-learning and institutionalisation literature, in which practices develop by codifying routines, connecting to adjacent routines and becoming embedded in structure and strategy (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Crossan et al., 1999; Schein, 2010). Each transition marks a change in kind: from individual initiative to documented procedure (1→2); from documented procedure to consistent cross-unit embedding (2→3); from embedding to strategic ownership and cross-functional coordination (3→4); and from coordination to continuous, self-correcting improvement (4→5).

Maturity is read through three lenses, which together define what an assessor should look for and give the levels their content. *Institutionalisation* concerns how formal, documented and consistently applied a practice is. *Integration* concerns how reliably it is connected to the practices it is coupled with, and whether information flows in both directions. *Strategic embedding* concerns how far it is tied to organisational strategy, resourced, owned and measured. A practice sits at the level its weakest lens can sustain, and the assessor is required to record which lens is holding it back—a discipline that makes the judgement auditable and often identifies the intervention directly. **Table 7** gives the descriptors.

The purpose of the scale gives it two properties. It is comparative, not normative: the objective is to reveal gaps between coupled practices, not to drive every practice to level 5, and a Developing practice is unproblematic among Developing neighbours while acute among Strategic ones. And it is ordinal, not cardinal: the intervals between levels are not assumed equal, so the numerals are labels for ordered categories used to compute a difference, not quantities on a ratio scale.

Table 7. Developmental maturity levels of HR practices, read across three assessment lenses.

Level	Institutionalisation	Integration with coupled practices	Strategic embedding
1·Emerging	Informal and individual-driven; no standard process; outcomes depend on who is in post	Operates in isolation; links to adjacent practices are ad hoc	Disconnected from strategy; reactive
2·Developing	Basic documented procedures; partial and uneven managerial consistency	Occasional, informal coordination with adjacent practices	Loosely linked to strategy; compliance-oriented
3·Integrated	Embedded and applied consistently across units	Reliably connected to coupled practices; information flows both ways	Aligned to operational objectives
4·Strategic	Standardised, explicitly owned and resourced	Cross-functionally coordinated; interfaces actively managed	Directly serves strategic goals; measured

Continued table:

Level	Institutionalisation	Integration with coupled practices	Strategic embedding
5-Adaptive	Continuously improved through feedback and learning	Co-evolves with coupled practices; interfaces self-correct	Anticipates and shapes strategy; innovates

Note: the levels are provisional ordinal descriptors for comparative judgement, not a validated measurement scale. A practice is placed at the level its weakest lens can sustain, and the limiting lens is recorded.

Source: Author's own creation.

6.3. What counts as evidence

If maturity is to be assessed rather than asserted, the evidence base must be specified. Most organisations already hold the material required. The discipline the framework imposes is to record which source supports each level assigned, and to keep two evidence streams apart: maturity is established from documentary, process and governance evidence, while perceptual evidence from employee and manager surveys is used to assess salience rather than maturity. Section 6.7 explains why that separation is not optional. **Table 8** lists the sources, what each is best suited to, and its principal limitation.

Table 8. Evidence sources for maturity assessment and salience assessment.

Evidence source	Best suited to	Illustrative indicators	Principal limitation
Documentation and HR audit	Institutionalisation	Existence, currency and scope of documented procedures; audit findings on consistency of application	Documents describe intent, not practice; risks overstating maturity
Existing HR analytics and process data	Integration	Whether appraisal outcomes move into pay decisions; promotion and internal-mobility rates against training completions; workforce-plan coverage of actual hiring	Available data reflect what is already measured, which itself correlates with maturity
Governance and strategy artefacts	Strategic embedding	Named ownership, budget lines, board or executive reporting, inclusion in strategic plans	Formal ownership may be nominal
Manager interviews and focus groups	Institutionalisation and integration, as practised	Workarounds, informal local rules, discrepancies between documented and actual processes	Small samples; recall and impression management
Employee and manager surveys	Salience, not maturity	Perceived fairness and justice, perceived HR system consistency, felt contradiction in expectations	Must be collected and analysed separately from maturity, to avoid circular inference (Section 6.7)

Source: Author's own creation.

6.4. The synchronisation matrix and the basis of its thresholds

Divergence must be translated into a proportionate response. **Table 9** relates the size of the maturity gap across an interface to expected paradox salience and a recommended managerial response, and **Figure 3** presents the same relationship visually. The matrix embodies Proposition 5: rather than balancing all tensions simultaneously, managers sequence development so that the widest, most salient gaps close first, allowing coupled practices to re-synchronise before attention moves elsewhere.

The reasoning behind the bands is as follows, and is conceptual rather than empirical. An interface can absorb a difference when the downstream practice possesses the routines needed to receive the upstream output. Where two practices share a level, they share an operating logic and the contradiction stays latent. Where they are one level apart, the downstream practice lacks a single stage of development but retains a broadly compatible logic, so the difference appears as friction that competent local discretion absorbs. At two levels apart, the practices are non-adjacent: the downstream practice lacks both a stage of

formalisation and a stage of integration, so upstream output arrives in a form for which it has no routine, and recurring workarounds appear. At three or more, the practices operate on qualitatively different logics, as when a self-correcting Adaptive practice is paired with one that has only basic documented procedure, and the mismatch becomes visible to employees as contradiction, with defensive behaviour following. Four is the widest separation the scale permits.

Three qualifications bound how the matrix should be used. First, the bands are ordinal expectations about direction, not calibrated cut-off points: nothing in the argument establishes that a gap of 3 crosses a real discontinuity that a gap of 2 does not, and empirical work may well find the relationship smooth rather than banded. Second, the same numerical gap is not expected to carry the same consequence everywhere. Tighter coupling should amplify it, and the direction of the gap should matter—an advanced upstream practice generating signals a lagging downstream practice cannot act upon is expected to be more salient than the reverse, because the surplus is visible to employees. Specifying coupling tightness and gap direction as moderators is a priority for further theoretical development. Third, alternative operationalisations are plausible and should be tested against this one, including a continuous divergence index and a coupling-weighted composite across all interfaces.

Table 9. The developmental synchronisation matrix (provisional).

Maturity difference	Synchronisation	Expected paradox salience	Interpretation of the interface	Recommended managerial response
0	Complete	Very low	Shared operating logic; contradiction absorbed	Monitor
1	High	Low	Adjacent stages; compatible logic; friction absorbed by discretion	Minor adjustments
2	Moderate	Medium	Non-adjacent; upstream output arrives without a receiving routine	Targeted development of the lagging practice
3	Low	High	Qualitatively different logics; contradiction visible to employees	Immediate sequencing
≥ 4	Critical	Very high	Widest separation the scale permits; no shared logic	Strategic intervention

Note: the bands express an expected monotonic direction. The numerical cut-off points are illustrative and require empirical calibration; the same gap may carry different consequences depending on coupling tightness and on which of the two practices leads.

Source: Author's own creation.

Maturity difference	Synchronisation	Paradox salience	Managerial response
0	Complete	Very low	Monitor
1	High	Low	Minor adjustments
2	Moderate	Medium	Targeted development
3	Low	High	Immediate sequencing
≥4	Critical	Very high	Strategic intervention

Figure 3. The developmental synchronisation matrix: as maturity difference across an interface widens, expected paradox salience rises and the recommended managerial response escalates. The bands are provisional and require empirical calibration.

Source: Author's own creation.

6.5. The six-stage procedure

The HRMDF operationalises the approach as a six-stage procedure, set out in **Table 10** and depicted in **Figure 4**. The procedure is comparative at every stage: maturity is assessed relative to the practices with which a given practice is coupled, because it is the relative gap rather than the absolute level that is proposed to drive salience. The diagnostic therefore resists ranking practices against an external ideal and instead maps the internal topography of divergence. **Table 10** also records, for each stage, the error that most commonly undermines it, since in the author's teaching use of the protocol the same four failures recur.

Table 10. The HR Maturity Diagnostic Framework (HRMDF): stages, evidence and common errors.

Stage	Guiding question	Evidence typically used	Output	Most common error
1·Architecture mapping	What is the boundary of this HR system, which practices operate within it, and which pairs are tightly coupled?	Organisational and process documentation; manager interviews	HR systems architecture, with couplings justified	Listing practices without establishing which are genuinely coupled
2·Maturity assessment	How far has each practice developed on institutionalisation, integration and strategic embedding?	Documentation and audit; HR analytics; governance artefacts	Maturity profile, each level evidenced and its limiting lens recorded	Levelling against an external ideal rather than comparatively
3·Divergence mapping	What is the absolute maturity gap across each coupled interface, and how do the interfaces rank?	Stage 2 output	Developmental divergence map, ranked	Reading a system average instead of a pattern of pairwise gaps
4·Paradox localisation	Which experienced tension traces to which high-divergence interface, and which of the recurring paradoxes does it express?	Survey and interview evidence on salience, read against the divergence map	Critical-interface map	Attributing the tension to the single visible practice rather than the interface
5·Prioritisation and sequencing	Which interface should be addressed first, weighing salience against the feasibility of raising the laggard?	Stages 3 and 4, plus assessment of managerial discretion and constraint	Developmental sequencing plan	Advancing the leading practice, or attempting system-wide balancing

Continued table:

Stage	Guiding question	Evidence typically used	Output	Most common error
6-Synchronisation monitoring	Which indicator will reveal that a re-synchronised interface is diverging again, and at what cadence is it reviewed?	Selected process indicators from existing analytics	Monitoring plan and review cycle	Treating synchronisation as achieved once rather than sustained

Source: Author's own creation.

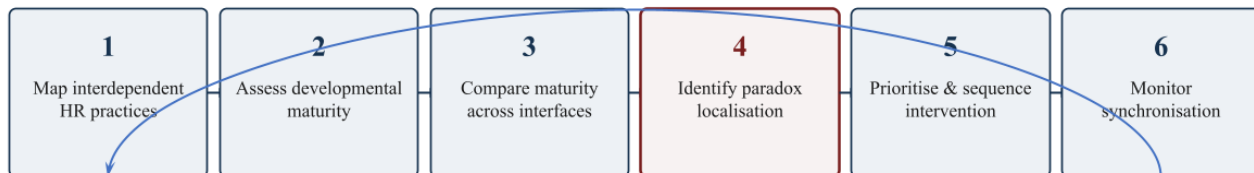
*re-diagnose — continuous developmental synchronisation*

Figure 4. The HRMDF procedure: a six-stage diagnostic loop that maps interdependence, locates high-divergence interfaces, sequences intervention, and re-opens the diagnosis as practices continue to mature.

Source: Author's own creation.

6.6 A worked application at the performance management rewards interface

To show how the stages operate in practice, consider a hypothetical professional-services firm of about 300 staff that has grown quickly. The example is constructed to illustrate the protocol and is not an empirical case. Its presenting tensions are that high performers are leaving despite strong appraisal ratings, and that a sense of unfairness about pay is spreading.

Stage 1. The boundary is drawn around the firm's internal HR system. Performance management and rewards are marked as tightly coupled, because appraisal outputs are the designated input to pay decisions. Performance and succession planning are marked as coupled for the same reason. The presenting tensions are recorded as observations, not yet as explanations.

Stage 2. Performance management is assessed as Adaptive (5): calibration is documented and consistently applied, appraisal data flows into workforce reporting, the system is owned at executive level and is revised each year in response to feedback—all three lenses support the level. Rewards are assessed as Developing (2): a pay policy exists and is documented, but application varies by partner, pay decisions are not systematically connected to appraisal outputs, and no one owns the reward architecture. Its limiting lens is integration.

Stage 3. The gap across the Performance management ↔ Rewards interface is $|5 - 2| = 3$, placing it in the “Low synchronisation / high expected salience” band. Performance ↔ Succession also returns a gap of 3. Three other interfaces return gaps of 1 or 2.

Stage 4. The presenting grievance names pay, which points the eye at the reward system. But Rewards is not uniquely weak—workforce planning, career management and succession are also at Developing. What distinguishes the reward system is not its level but its position: it sits opposite the firm's most advanced practice. The localisation is therefore that the tension sits at the interface, where precise, differentiated performance signals arrive at a flat and largely undifferentiated pay structure and are experienced as injustice. This is the fairness paradox. The second high-divergence interface, Performance ↔ Succession, expresses the prosperity paradox and explains the loss of senior talent. Salience is checked against the three manifestations of Section 4.4: survey evidence of perceived unfairness (experiential), manager workarounds such as off-cycle retention awards

(behavioural), and regretted attrition concentrated among the highest-rated staff (systemic).

Stage 5. Both hot interfaces are high-salience, so feasibility decides the order. The reward redesign is the more feasible near-term move and addresses the more acute and spreading grievance, so it is sequenced first: raise Rewards toward Integrated so it can receive the appraisal signal, then re-synchronise before turning to succession. The framework's counsel is explicit here: do not respond by making appraisal more sophisticated, which widens the gap, and do not abandon differentiation, which merely relocates the problem. Close the gap by raising the lagging practice.

Stage 6. The monitoring indicator chosen for the first-sequenced interface is the correspondence between the distribution of appraisal ratings and the distribution of pay awards, reviewed at each pay cycle. Divergence is signalled when the two distributions decouple again.

The illustration is designed to show that the tension was not located where it was felt: blaming the pay system or the managers would have attacked one practice and left the interface untouched.

6.7. Threats to a valid diagnosis

The framework's practical credibility depends on acknowledging how a diagnosis can go wrong. Five threats are consequential enough to require explicit handling, and none is fully resolved by the protocol as it stands; **Table 11** lists them with the handling the protocol prescribes and the risk that remains.

Circularity is the most serious and requires separate comment. If maturity is inferred from the very tensions it is meant to explain, the diagnosis cannot fail, and the framework becomes unfalsifiable. The protocol addresses this circularity by separating the evidence bases described in Section 6.3 and, where feasible, by having maturity assessed by an assessor blind to the presenting tensions. Any future validation design must establish maturity independently of, and prior to, the paradoxes it is theorised to cause. The remaining four threats—assessor disagreement over ordinal judgements, misidentification of which pairs are genuinely coupled, misattribution of tensions that in fact originate in scarcity, conduct, labour markets, or legal constraints, and reactivity where the HR function assesses its own practices—are handled but not eliminated by the protocol.

Table 11. Threats to a valid diagnosis and their handling.

Threat	How it manifests	Handling within the protocol	Residual risk
Circularity	Maturity inferred from the tension it is meant to explain, making the diagnosis unfalsifiable	Separate evidence bases for maturity and salience; assess maturity blind to presenting tensions where feasible	Complete separation is difficult in practice; validation designs must establish temporal ordering
Assessor disagreement	Different assessors place the same practice at different levels, especially at the 3/4 boundary	Evidenced justification and recorded limiting lens for each level; independent dual coding then reconciliation	Inter-assessor reliability is untested; the instrument may prove insufficiently anchored
Interface misidentification	Practices are treated as coupled when the dependence is weak, or genuine couplings are missed	Apply the systematic-input test; run the diagnosis under alternative coupling assumptions	Coupling tightness is itself unmeasured, and is likely a moderator
Misattribution	Tensions caused by scarcity, conduct, labour markets, or legal constraints are read as divergence	Require alternative explanations to be considered and recorded before attribution	The framework can always name a plausible interface, so the risk is structural, not incidental
Reactivity and self-assessment bias	Maturity is overstated where owners assess their own practices	Prefer process data to self-reports; separate assessment from appraisal of the assessed	Cannot be eliminated where the HR function is both subject and assessor

Source: Author's own creation.

7. Illustrative application: from inclusive shared value to HRM

This section illustrates the transferability of the developmental mechanism. It draws on previously published sources rather than on new data, and it is not a test of the HRM framework: no proposition in Section 5 is examined here, and the material cannot confirm that maturity divergence produces paradox salience in HR systems.

7.1. The developmental pattern in the Rwandan coffee industry

MTISV was grounded in the Rwandan coffee industry, where value creation depends on interdependent stages—cultivation, processing, quality assessment and market access—that frequently develop at different rates (Nkurunziza, 2026; Macchiavello and Morjaria, 2021). Where processing capability outpaced quality-recognition systems, or market access lagged production, the developmental gaps between coupled stages were the points at which value failed to be shared, even where each stage was individually competent (Gereffi et al., 2005). Competence at each stage was not sufficient: producers could grow high-quality cherries and processors could operate capable washing stations, yet returns failed to reach producers where recognition and market-access stages had not developed correspondingly (Macchiavello and Morjaria, 2021; Gereffi et al., 2005). The binding constraint was synchronisation, not capability.

7.2. The analytic correspondence

The employment relationship reproduces the structural conditions described in Section 3.3, and the correspondence is specific, not merely analogical. The upstream stage that has matured faster corresponds to the practice that generates output—appraisal producing differentiated judgements, L&D producing certified capability. The downstream stage that cannot absorb the advance corresponds to the coupled practice that must receive it—reward, career structure. The failure of recognition across the interface corresponds to the arrival of a signal for which the receiving practice has no routine. And value loss corresponds to paradox salience, with the important difference noted in **Table 3**: in the HR case the loss is mediated by subjective experience, since employees perceive the mismatch and respond to it. That difference is why the HRM formulation requires the latent/salient distinction, and why perceptual evidence enters the diagnosis at Stage 4 but not at Stage 2.

7.3. Localising the five recurring HRM paradoxes

Applying the framework to five paradoxes that recur across the HRM literature shows how each may be localised at a specific interface, as summarised in **Table 12** and mapped in **Figure 5**. The resource paradox (ambition versus capacity) is proposed to localise where recruitment matures faster than workforce planning. The fairness paradox (transparency versus differentiated treatment) localises where evaluation outpaces reward recognition (Adams, 1965; Greenberg, 1990; Colquitt, 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Bloom, 1999). The value paradox (competence versus recognition) localises where learning and development exceed career opportunity. The autonomy paradox (empowerment versus control) localises where leadership matures faster than governance. The prosperity paradox (short-term productivity versus long-term capability) localises where performance management outpaces succession planning.

These mappings are illustrative rather than exhaustive or confirmed. They are derived by applying the framework's logic to tensions already described in the literature, and each is a hypothesis about where the tension concentrates. They share a diagnostic signature: one practice has advanced faster than a practice that depends on it, and the resulting gap is experienced as a specific contradiction—effort unrewarded, competence unused, empowerment unsupported. The framework's value here is to render such experiences legible as interface problems with a candidate developmental explanation that can be examined and, if necessary, rejected, rather than as diffuse dissatisfaction to be addressed through general

engagement initiatives.

Table 12. Five recurring HRM paradoxes and their proposed localisation interfaces.

Paradox	Competing demands	Proposed localisation interface	Proposed developmental cause
Resource	Ambition vs. available capacity	Recruitment ↔ Workforce planning	Recruitment matures faster
Fairness	Transparency vs. differentiated treatment	Performance management ↔ Rewards	Evaluation exceeds recognition
Value	Competence vs. recognition	Learning and development ↔ Career management	Capability exceeds opportunity
Autonomy	Empowerment vs organisational control	Leadership ↔ Governance	Leadership matures faster
Prosperity	Short-term productivity vs. long-term capability	Performance ↔ Succession planning	Output exceeds development

Note: the mappings are illustrative hypotheses derived from the literature, not empirically confirmed localisations.

Source: Author's own creation.

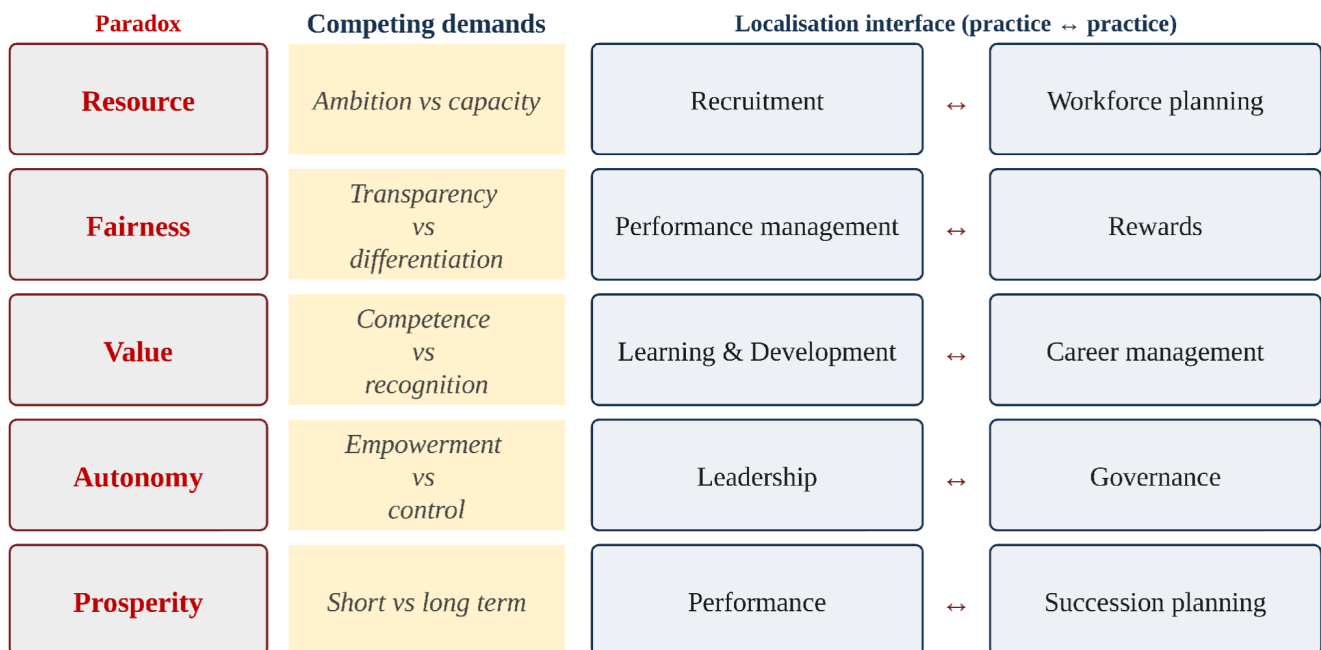


Figure 5. The five HRM paradoxes and their proposed localisation interfaces: each recurring paradox is proposed to localise at the interface between two interdependent practices maturing at different rates.

Source: Author's own creation.

7.4. A developmental reading of HR coherence

This reading redefines HR coherence. A coherent HR system is proposed to be not one in which every practice is equally advanced, but one in which interdependent practices are synchronised so that no interface carries a critical maturity gap. Coherence in this view is relational and dynamic, a property of interfaces and not of individual practices, and it is achievable through sequenced development even where the system as a whole remains a work in progress.

8. Boundary conditions and scope

The framework is portable in principle, since its propositions are specified in terms of interdependence and maturity differentials rather than of any particular sector, national culture or institutional regime. Portability in principle is not applicability everywhere, however, and the conditions under which the framework is expected to have purchase should be stated explicitly.

Table 13 states the six conditions that bound the framework's use, why each is required and what follows from its absence. Two of them bear most directly on

contemporary practice and are discussed here. The framework as stated assumes that both practices at an interface are governed by the same organisation; where HR activity is distributed across organisational boundaries—platform-mediated work, outsourced HR, professional employer organisations, extended ecosystems—the interface may cross firms, and the framework would require extension before it applies (Duggan et al., 2020; Snell and Morris, 2021; Ouyang et al., 2026). And the sequencing rule assumes the laggard can in fact be raised; where it is fixed by law, collective agreement or sector-wide pay regulation, as reward often is in public administration, the interface is structurally rather than developmentally blocked. The diagnosis retains descriptive value in explaining why the tension is acute, but managing the salience of a gap that cannot be closed is a different task from closing it, and one the framework does not currently address.

Two further limits concern what the framework does not claim. It is not a theory of practice quality: a practice may be mature and still be poorly designed or ethically objectionable, and an HR system in which two such practices are synchronised will register as healthy on this diagnostic while being neither. And divergence is not always a defect. An organisation may deliberately advance one practice ahead of its neighbours as a change strategy, accepting transient salience as the price of movement. The framework predicts the resulting tension and identifies where it will fall; whether that price is worth paying is a strategic judgement it does not make.

Table 13. Boundary conditions of the HR Maturity Diagnostic Framework.

Condition	Why it is required	Consequences if absent
Non-trivial interdependence between practices	Coupling is the mechanism that transmits divergence into tension	Divergence does not generate paradox; the framework has little purchase
Practices are identifiable and differentiable	Levels are assigned per practice and compared pairwise	No maturity profile exists; the unit of analysis is absent, as in micro-organisations
Both practices are governed by the same organisation	The framework as stated locates interfaces internally	Interfaces cross organisational boundaries; extension required for platform, outsourced and ecosystem arrangements
Managerial discretion over the lagging practice	Sequencing prescribes raising the laggard	The gap is structurally blocked; the diagnosis remains descriptive but the prescription does not follow
Time horizon of quarters to years	Maturation is slow and cumulative	The profile changes faster than diagnosis can track; unsuited to acute crisis response
Cross-context equivalence of level descriptors	Comparison assumes the descriptors mean the same thing	Comparative and cross-national use is unwarranted until equivalence is established

Source: Author's own creation.

9. Discussion

9.1. Reframing HRM paradoxes as localisable

The paper's primary theoretical move is to treat HRM paradoxes as localisable rather than uniformly distributed. If the proposition holds, it eases a practical impasse: managers need not treat tension as a pervasive condition to be endured everywhere, but can form defensible hypotheses about where it is acute—the interfaces mapped in **Table 12** and **Figure 5**—and act there first. The localisation principle converts a broad theoretical insight into a targeted managerial one without abandoning paradox theory's core claim that contradictions persist (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). It is worth being clear about what is and is not claimed: the framework offers a principled way of ordering attention, not a demonstrated method for identifying causes.

This is not a claim that paradoxes can be resolved. The contradiction between transparency and differentiation, for example, is permanent. Localisation offers

instead a way to manage its expression, keeping it latent where possible and addressing it precisely where it becomes salient: a different and more tractable task than the injunction to hold opposites in perpetual balance.

9.2. Extending contingency theory through developmental synchronisation

For contingency theory, the paper offers a dynamic reconception of fit. Recasting alignment as developmental synchronisation between interdependent practices suggests why tensions persist after structural adjustment: if fit is a moving relationship rather than a state, misfit re-emerges wherever coupled practices resume diverging (Donaldson, 2001; Delery and Doty, 1996). This is a contribution of specification rather than of direction. The HR-ecosystem literature has already established that alignment is processual and distributed (Snell and Morris, 2021; Snell et al., 2023; Ouyang et al., 2026); the developmental account adds a mechanism that attaches misalignment to a nameable pair of practices and assigns it a magnitude, making it addressable and not only describable.

9.3. What the HRM extension adds beyond MTISV

The framework is derived from the author's earlier work, so its incremental contribution requires a separate statement. MTISV established that interdependent components mature unevenly and that value is lost at the resulting discontinuities. Three consequences arise only in the HRM setting. First, the outcome is mediated by subjective experience: where a value chain loses surplus whether or not anyone perceives the discontinuity, an HR system generates paradox because employees perceive and respond to the mismatch. This required importing paradox theory's latent/salient distinction, which has no counterpart in MTISV, and specifying salience as a compound experiential, behavioural and systemic condition (Section 4.4). Second, the receiving practice in an HR system is itself a system of judgement rather than a processing capability, which is why the fairness interface behaves differently from a physical processing discontinuity and why perceptual evidence enters the diagnosis at a specific stage. Third, the HRM setting permits a sequencing rule with a determinate content—raise the laggard, close the widest feasible gap first—because HR practices can be developed selectively in a way that value-chain stages, distributed across independent actors, often cannot. The transfer is therefore a generalisation of a mechanism, accompanied by a substantially new specification of its outcome, its evidence and its decision rule.

9.4. Extending strategic HRM through diagnostic theory

Finally, the paper contributes a diagnostic extension to strategic HRM. Much strategic HRM research explains how HR systems affect performance in general terms (Jiang et al., 2012; Boxall and Purcell, 2016); the HRMDF proposes a means of forming structured hypotheses about where a specific system is losing value and in what order to intervene. It also connects to sustainable and common-good HRM, which frames the balancing of competing demands as an enduring organisational responsibility (Ehnert, 2009; Aust et al., 2020; Hahn et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2023; Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020): synchronised development offers one concrete route to that balance.

10. Managerial implications

For practice, the framework reorients paradox management from diffuse balancing to targeted, sequenced development. Managers can use the HRMDF to map their HR architecture, compare the maturity of coupled practices, and concentrate effort on the interfaces where divergence appears greatest. The claim should be stated carefully: because the instrument is provisional, its output is a ranked set of hypotheses to be tested against other evidence and challenged by those who know the organisation, not an authoritative identification of intervention priorities. Its present value lies less in the ranking it produces than in the discipline it imposes: an assessor must evidence each judgement, name the interface and not

the visible practice, and specify what evidence would overturn the assessment.

Used in that spirit, the approach is also economical in principle. The framework predicts that closing the widest feasible gaps first will yield greater relief per unit of effort than diffuse system-wide intervention, allowing organisations to improve coherence incrementally rather than attempting simultaneous reform. That prediction is the comparative-effectiveness claim of Proposition 5, and it remains to be tested; the practical case for sequencing therefore rests for now on the reasoning given in Section 6.4 and not on demonstrated effect. Four errors recur often enough to be worth naming: blaming the visibly weak practice instead of the interface; levelling practices against an external ideal instead of against their neighbours; “fixing” a hot interface by further advancing the practice that is already ahead, which widens the gap; and attempting to balance everything at once instead of sequencing.

The approach also carries organisational-political value. Because it produces a reasoned, evidenced account of where tension may originate, it can depersonalise contested HR problems: a fairness complaint becomes a diagnosable appraisal–reward divergence rather than a grievance against particular managers. This can make difficult interventions easier to justify and to sequence, and it gives HR a defensible basis for proposing not only what to address but what to address first.

11. Limitations and future research

The framework is conceptual and untested, and its limitations follow from that status. The propositions await validation (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007); the illustrative material draws on previously published sources rather than new data; the maturity levels and synchronisation thresholds are provisional; and neither the reliability of maturity assessment nor the diagnostic accuracy of the protocol has been established. **Table 1** records these limits element by element, and Section 6.7 identifies the threats that a valid application must handle.

Three limitations require fuller comment. The first is the risk of circularity discussed in Section 6.7: unless maturity is established independently of the tensions it is meant to explain, the framework cannot be disconfirmed. The second is that the framework specifies a mechanism without specifying its moderators. Coupling tightness and the direction of the gap are both likely to condition the divergence–salience relationship, and neither is currently formalised; a fuller theory would state them as propositions in their own right. The third is that the framework’s account of salience, though specified in Section 4.4, aggregates three manifestations that may not move together, and it is possible that divergence predicts one—behavioural workarounds, say—much more strongly than another.

Table 14 presents a staged research agenda. The ordering matters: construct development must precede proposition testing, since testing a proposition with an unvalidated instrument would confound the two. Comparative and multilevel research across sectors would then help establish the boundary conditions under which maturity divergence most strongly predicts paradox salience, and whether developmental sequencing improves organisational effectiveness relative to alternative approaches.

Table 14. A staged agenda for empirical development and validation.

Stage	Objective	Construct or claim addressed	Illustrative design
1·Construct development	Establish that developmental maturity can be assessed reliably across the three lenses	Maturity levels (Table 7)	Anchored rating protocol; independent dual coding across multiple organisations; report inter-assessor agreement

Continued table:

Stage	Objective	Construct or claim addressed	Illustrative design
2·Measure development	Establish independent measures of salience across its experiential, behavioural and systemic manifestations	Paradox salience (Section 4.4)	Item development and validation against established justice and HR-system-strength measures; check that the three manifestations cohere
3·Threshold calibration	Determine whether the divergence–salience relationship is banded or smooth, and where any discontinuities lie	Synchronisation matrix (Table 9)	Cross-sectional study across many interfaces; compare ordinal bands with a continuous divergence index
4·Mechanism testing	Test P1, P2 and P4	Localisation and divergence–salience	Multi-organisation study mapping salience against independently coded coupling and maturity
5·Moderator specification	Test whether coupling tightness and gap direction condition the relationship	Currently unformalised moderators	Interaction models; comparison of upstream-leading with downstream-leading interfaces
6·Intervention testing	Test P3 and P5	Synchronisation and sequencing	Longitudinal or quasi-experimental comparison of sequenced with system-wide intervention
7·Outcome testing	Test P6	Mediation of fit and outcomes	Multi-wave design with temporally ordered measures of fit, synchronisation and outcomes
8·Boundary testing	Establish where the framework applies	Boundary conditions (Table 13)	Replication across sectors, firm sizes, institutional regimes and distributed work arrangements

Source: Author's own creation.

12. Conclusion

Organisational paradoxes are, on the account offered here, neither random nor uniformly distributed: they are proposed to become salient where organisational development has become uneven among practices that remain mutually dependent. By generalising to HRM the developmental logic of the Maturation Tree of Inclusive Shared Value, in which contingency and paradox reasoning are already joined, this paper has introduced paradox localisation—the claim that HRM paradoxes become salient at interfaces of divergent developmental maturity—and translated it into a provisional diagnostic framework that offers managers a structured way to locate, prioritise, and sequence intervention. The propositions remain to be tested and the instruments to be validated, and Section 11 indicates the order in which that work should proceed. If the argument holds, the management of paradox begins not with balancing competing objectives everywhere at once, but with recognising where organisational development has ceased to move together, and bringing coupled practices back into step.

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