How you frame the problem is part of the solution

Framing is a critical skill for leaders, determining whether innovation generates empty hype or credible hope. This is the power of framing.

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To paraphrase Machiavelli, "There is nothing more difficult or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the innovator has enemies in all those who have done well under the old conditions, and only lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new, partly from the incredulity of those who do not readily believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it."

Those words from 500 years ago still resonate. Today's leaders face the same challenge: resistance from those invested in the status quo, and only tentative support from those who might benefit from change.

How leaders communicate remains decisive. Success depends not just on strategy, but on framing it in a way that makes the status quo insufficient compared with the future opportunity. Effective leadership, therefore, requires careful framing.

How framing earns legitimacy

Framing, in simple terms, is how leaders shape the way others interpret a problem and its solution. Like a painter choosing what will fit within the boundaries of a canvas, leaders include certain elements while leaving others out. The result is not just a description of reality but an interpretation of it.

One of the most cited examples is the launch of Apple's iPod. Rather than touting product specifications, it was presented as "1,000 songs in your pocket," translating technological improvement into a lifestyle.

That distinction matters. In complex environments, people rarely act on raw information about product specifications alone. They respond to what it will mean for their lives. If done well, framing can result in two important outcomes.

The first is **venture legitimacy**, where investors, customers and business partners become convinced that the new venture is credible and worth supporting, even without any track record.

To do this, entrepreneurs typically emphasize what makes the offering distinctive, while anchoring it in familiar, recognizable elements so audiences can understand and trust it. They also point out the limitations of existing solutions, positioning their offer as a better alternative. Finally, they position the venture as a future leader or industry game-changer with long-term relevance.

A recent example of this is OpenAI, which faced a classic legitimacy challenge: Was this novel technology trustworthy, useful or even safe? To address this, OpenAI combined strong novelty claims, emphasizing breakthroughs in GenAI and advanced conversational capabilities, with familiarity anchors, likening ChatGPT to a chatbot or digital assistant with which users were already familiar. This analogical framing made the technology more understandable while preserving its distinctiveness.

The second outcome is **field legitimacy**, where an entirely new type of business, industry or category of activity gains acceptance by society. This involves defining what the new field is about and why it matters, while also building shared meanings, norms and identities that connect with the broader public.

Entrepreneurs do this by emphasizing the distinctiveness of the field, showing how it differs from existing industries in addressing new or unmet needs. At the same time, they maintain coherence and resonance by aligning their messages with what people already believe and value. The effect is stronger when multiple ventures reinforce each other's narratives, creating a sense of shared identity and momentum, similar to a social movement.

An example of this is the mainstreaming of plant-based meat, where pioneers like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods used environmental concerns to frame plant-based meat as a healthy, sustainable alternative. Over time, this collective effort shifted consumer perceptions, making plant-based options acceptable.

Achieving both venture *and* field legitimation starts by shaping meaning and perception through framing.

Three key levers for framing

Leaders have three framing levers at their disposal, similar to how entrepreneurs mobilize support in high-uncertainty environments.

1. Diagnostic framing

It starts with defining the problem. What, exactly, is wrong? And why does it matter now? The way a problem is framed at the outset determines the range of solutions that are subsequently considered.

The key is to avoid defining the problem too narrowly or technically, which leads only to incremental fixes. A broader focus, with an added sense of meeting the moment, can encourage more innovative approaches and expand the range of proposed solutions.

2. Prognostic framing

This answers the question: What should be done? However, in outlining the solution, effective leaders go beyond simply presenting a vision; they provide clear direction on how that vision can be achieved. They combine ambition with concrete steps, appealing to those who seek detailed plans as well as to broader audiences who need accessibility. This involves balancing different types of language: more abstract framing, allowing people to interpret and connect with the idea in their own way; and more concrete, specific language, to make the solution feel practical, actionable and credible.

3. Motivational framing

This addresses why people should care and take action. Facts about the benefits are rarely enough. People are more likely to engage when they feel part of something meaningful, whether that is innovation, progress or shared purpose.

Of the three levers, motivational framing is often the most overlooked, but its power should not be underestimated.

This proved true in the case of a French social enterprise I studied called C'est qui le patron?! (Who is the boss?!). The founder, Nicolas Chabanne, reframed milk as a symbol of farmers struggling under collapsing margins, rather than just a staple product. By asking the public via a Facebook vote to determine a fair price for milk, he positioned the venture as a way for people to help others by acting in solidarity with farmers. This motivational framing earned the emotional investment of consumers, who then became active agents. It also captured media attention, further amplifying the message.

This creates what we call "energized solidarity framing," combining moral urgency with simple action and shared excitement, and it can substitute for scale in the early stages of growth. In leveraging social media, even smaller companies can mobilize large followings and build momentum that outpaces larger, slower moving multinationals. And once that momentum grows, it drives a self-reinforcing virtuous circle. Thus, with just 28 employees, Chabanne managed to reach 50% of households in France with milk that was 30% more expensive than competitors' milk, and consumers were more than willing to pay, thanks to motivational framing.

The role of culture

C’est qui le patron?! also succeeded by building on ideals rooted in the revolutionary spirit of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* in France, with particular emphasis on the latter ideal of solidarity. Culture is notoriously difficult to change, which is why the most successful initiatives tend to work with, rather than against, the values of the cultural context in which they operate.

In this sense, entrepreneurial framing is more context-dependent than traditional brand positioning. Brand positioning focuses on clarifying the features and benefits of products or services for consumers, with success measured through purchasing intentions and brand loyalty. By contrast, entrepreneurial framing draws on existing values, extending across ecosystems, encompassing customers, business partners, regulators and competitors, to articulate a compelling vision of a different future, thereby promoting behavioral change.

Where leaders go wrong

Despite its importance, framing is frequently mishandled. When done poorly, it can generate confusion, skepticism or even resistance instead of alignment and support. Four common pitfalls stand out.

1. Declaring opportunities without establishing what’s broken

Leaders sometimes jump straight to solutions without clearly explaining why change is needed in the first place. Clearly articulating the problem will focus attention and attract resources more quickly. People will have little reason to act unless they see an urgent problem that needs addressing.

2. Relying on abstract or hype-driven language

Although hype can help attract early interest and investment, it also raises expectations that may be difficult to meet, and can even spiral into outright fraud, as in the infamous case of Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes, who went to jail for making grand claims about her blood-testing technology that she knew weren’t true.

When expectations are not fulfilled, ventures risk reputational damage, funding loss and even broader skepticism toward the legitimacy of the field, undermining the entire category of ventures or products.

3. Framing threats instead of opportunities

Emphasizing risks and dangers can grab attention, but it rarely builds lasting commitment. People are more likely to engage when they see opportunity rather than fear.

For instance, discussions around AI get taken to dystopian extremes, instead of setting realistic expectations of how AI can empower rather than replace people.

In other research, I contrasted Borders with Barnes & Noble's response to Amazon's market entry. One reason why Barnes & Noble survived the disruption while Borders went bankrupt is because the CEO chose to frame online bookselling as an opportunity, and this proved key to mobilizing the organization for change.

Think about how you frame opportunities or threats to your employees, customers, business partners or teams. Is the glass always half-empty or do you see it as half-full?

Leaning on positive emotions and hope is a powerful thing.

4. Excluding key stakeholders from the narrative

Framing that does not resonate across different audiences can lead to misalignment and weak engagement. Effective framing is inclusive, connecting employees, customers and business partners in a shared story.

C'est qui le patron?! was successful partly because it included consumers in the setting of fair prices.

Similarly, Barnes & Noble framed online bookselling as empowering for a multitude of stakeholders: writers, publishers and booksellers as well as for book buyers.

So, when you're framing opportunities, don't leave out key groups, but explain why it makes sense to everyone and make them part of a much bigger story.

Framing as an ongoing process

A common misconception about framing is that it is a one-time exercise. In reality, framing is continuous. As conditions evolve, so too must the narrative. Organizations that succeed in driving change regularly revisit and refine how they frame their ideas, ensuring that their message remains relevant, credible and aligned with shifting expectations.

For example, Uber has shifted its narrative from initially being a disruptor of taxis to emphasizing convenience, safety and everyday utility, changing its framing to overcome resistance. Airbnb has also done this by turning the idea of "staying in a stranger's home" into a notion of "belonging anywhere," attempting to reshape how people approach its offer. Tesla initially highlighted the uniqueness of electric vehicles, and as the EV field became more established, it shifted its framing to being an EV market leader.

Framing is rarely uncontested. In emerging fields like artificial intelligence, companies such as OpenAI are engaged in ongoing framing contests, promoting interpretations of AI as a tool for empowerment and productivity, while competing narratives emphasize risk or disruption.

Ultimately, framing is about far more than communication; it is a core element of leadership. Defining the problem, articulating a path forward and motivating others to act are deeply interconnected tasks.

In an era of uncertainty and rapid change, the ability to continuously adapt and refine framing can determine whether ventures, and even entire industries, gain legitimacy — because, as stated before, framing does not simply describe reality; it shapes what others believe is possible, legitimate and worth pursuing.

This article forms part of IESE Business School Insight online magazine No. 173 (Sept.-Dec. 2026) and was also included in the special annual print edition, Insight for Global Leaders No. 2 (2026).

MORE INFO:

"Entrepreneurial framing" by Yuliya Snihur, Llewellyn D.W. Thomas, Raghu Garud and Nelson Phillips is published in *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (2022).

"The dark side of entrepreneurial framing: a process model of deception and legitimacy loss" by Raghu Garud, Yuliya Snihur, Llewellyn D.W. Thomas and Nelson Phillips is published in the *Academy of Management Review* (2023). This paper ranks in the top 1% of academic publications in the Economics & Business field.

"Incumbent response to business model innovation: the role of CEO opportunity framing" by

Yuliya Snihur, Christoph Zott and Andreea Kiss is published in the *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* (2025).

"The power of consumer solidarity framing in scaling up social impact" by Yuliya Snihur, Clarence Bluntz and Nancy Bocken is published in the *Journal of Business Venturing* (2026).

WATCH: The webinar "Framing opportunity: How leaders drive business model change" is available for Members of the IESE Alumni Association to watch on demand here.

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