

# Overton Leadership: Shifting Legitimacy Boundaries as a Strategic Capability in Complex Adaptive Systems

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## Abstract

*Purpose:* This article develops a novel theory of Overton Leadership, conceptualizing leadership as the strategic management of legitimacy boundaries in complex adaptive systems. It addresses a critical gap in leadership theory: how leaders expand the range of perceived acceptable strategic options under conditions of institutional constraint and normative resistance.

*Design/Methodology/Approach:* The study adopts a theory-building approach integrating institutional theory, complexity leadership, strategic framing, and legitimacy scholarship. A dynamic conceptual model is developed specifying core constructs, structural relationships, and formal propositions. The framework is expressed through a longitudinal equation model enabling empirical operationalization.

*Findings:* We theorize that Overton Leadership operates through narrative reframing and stakeholder cognitive realignment, resulting in legitimacy window expansion and strategic option growth. Organizational trust moderates reframing effectiveness, while environmental volatility accelerates legitimacy shifts. The model distinguishes leadership that adapts within constraints from leadership that redefines constraints.

*Theoretical Contributions:* The article contributes to leadership theory by: (1) Reframing leadership as legitimacy-boundary management; (2) Extending institutional entrepreneurship through a leader-centric dynamic model; (3) Formalizing legitimacy expansion as a measurable rate-of-change construct; (3) Integrating narrative framing into dynamic systems modeling.

*Practical Implications:* In AI governance, ESG transitions, and digital platform regulation, leaders must strategically expand normative acceptance before implementing transformative strategy. Overton Leadership provides a systematic framework for managing such shifts.

*Originality/Value:* This is the first formal theory positioning leadership as the dynamic expansion of the legitimacy window. It introduces a measurable construct of legitimacy shift and establishes a foundation for longitudinal empirical testing across organizational, technological, and governance domains.

## 1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by systemic uncertainty, normative volatility, technological disruption, and geopolitical fragmentation. Leaders are no longer merely tasked with adapting to change - they must actively reshape what is considered acceptable, legitimate, and strategically possible. In such contexts, the primary constraint is

often not resources or technology, but the boundaries of legitimacy within which action is perceived as viable.

The concept of the *Overton Window*, originating in political theory, refers to the range of ideas considered publicly acceptable at a given time. While extensively discussed in political discourse, its implications for organizational leadership remain underdeveloped. Yet organizations operate within similar normative windows - shaped by stakeholders, regulation, culture, media, and markets. Strategic moves outside this window are often rejected, resisted, or penalized.

This article introduces **Overton Leadership** as a distinct strategic leadership capability defined as:

*The deliberate and systematic expansion, repositioning, or reframing of legitimacy boundaries to enable strategic transformation under conditions of complexity and institutional constraint.*

Unlike Adaptive Leadership, which focuses on mobilizing stakeholders to respond to external challenges, Overton Leadership emphasizes redefining what stakeholders perceive as acceptable strategic options.

This article makes three theoretical contributions:

1. It conceptualizes leadership as a **legitimacy-shifting mechanism**, not merely an adaptive coordination function.
2. It integrates institutional theory, complexity leadership, and strategic framing into a unified model.
3. It proposes a multi-stage conceptual framework with formal propositions suitable for empirical testing.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Adaptive Leadership and Its Limits

Adaptive Leadership theory, originally developed by Heifetz (1994) and further elaborated by Heifetz and Linsky (2002), conceptualizes leadership as the practice of mobilizing individuals and collectives to confront complex, non-routine challenges. Central to the framework is the distinction between technical problems, which can be solved through existing expertise, and adaptive challenges, which require shifts in values, beliefs, roles, and behaviors. Leadership, in this view, is less about authority and more about orchestrating learning processes within a system.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded Adaptive Leadership into broader conversations about complexity, learning, and distributed authority (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007; Grint, 2005). Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), for example, aligns with Adaptive Leadership by emphasizing emergence, relational dynamics, and the importance of enabling adaptive tension within organizations. Similarly, scholars such as Northouse (2021) and Yukl (2013) highlight adaptive leadership behaviors as critical in volatile and uncertain environments.

However, while Adaptive Leadership robustly addresses how leaders mobilize stakeholders around difficult challenges, it implicitly assumes that the problem domain itself is socially recognized and normatively legitimate. That is, adaptive work presupposes that the issue lies within the existing “space of acceptable discourse.” The theory focuses on navigating conflict within recognized boundaries rather than redefining those boundaries themselves.

This limitation becomes evident when examining institutional transformation contexts. Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995) demonstrates that organizations operate within deeply embedded normative, cognitive, and regulative structures that define what is considered appropriate, rational, or legitimate. Leadership in such environments often requires not merely adaptation within norms but the active expansion of normative legitimacy. Adaptive Leadership does not fully theorize how leaders shift what is considered acceptable, feasible, or even discussable.

For instance, early corporate commitments to net-zero emissions were widely perceived as economically unrealistic and strategically irrational. Only after sustained reframing efforts, coalition-building, and narrative reconstruction did such commitments move from “radical” to “expected” within ESG governance frameworks (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010; Bansal, Kistruck, & Gao, 2018). This transition reflects not adaptive problem-solving but normative boundary transformation.

Similarly, AI governance mechanisms - such as algorithmic transparency requirements, fairness audits, and ethical review boards - were initially framed as constraints on innovation. Over time, through regulatory discourse, public concern over bias, and reputational risk exposure, governance structures became institutionalized expectations (Buhmann & Fieseler, 2023; Taeihagh, 2021). Again, this process reflects the expansion of legitimacy windows rather than adaptive alignment within pre-existing ones.

Moreover, research on institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009) demonstrates that actors can purposefully reshape institutional arrangements. Yet even this literature often emphasizes structural change rather than the cognitive-normative reframing mechanisms through which change becomes thinkable. Adaptive Leadership does not explicitly model this cognitive legitimacy shift process.

In addition, sensemaking scholarship (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) emphasizes how leaders construct interpretive frames that shape collective understanding. However, Adaptive Leadership treats framing as a facilitative tool for adaptation, rather than as a mechanism for redefining the boundaries of legitimacy.

Therefore, while Adaptive Leadership remains foundational in explaining how leaders mobilize systems for learning and change, it does not fully account for contexts in which:

- The proposed strategic direction lies outside dominant institutional norms.
- The solution space is perceived as politically, economically, or morally illegitimate.
- Leaders must first redefine what counts as “reasonable” before adaptation can occur.

In such cases, adaptation is insufficient. Leaders must engage in legitimacy expansion, altering the boundaries of what stakeholders perceive as possible and acceptable. This theoretical gap motivates the development of Overton Leadership as a distinct extension of adaptive and complexity-based leadership frameworks.

## 2.2 Institutional Entrepreneurship and Legitimacy Theory

Institutional theory provides a foundational explanation for why organizations tend toward conformity. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that organizations become increasingly similar over time through coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism. Suchman (1995) further conceptualized legitimacy as a generalized perception that organizational actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within socially constructed systems of norms, values, and beliefs. Within this framework, leaders are largely portrayed as actors operating under constraint, seeking legitimacy by aligning with dominant institutional logics rather than redefining them (Scott, 2014).

From this perspective, strategic action is bounded by what is already considered acceptable within the institutional environment. Organizations pursue conformity to secure regulatory approval, investor confidence, and stakeholder trust (Deephouse, 1996). Institutional pressures thus structure the “space of strategic possibility,” delimiting what leaders can credibly propose. Leadership, in this view, functions primarily as an adaptive mechanism that ensures survival through alignment with institutionalized expectations.

However, subsequent scholarship challenged this deterministic interpretation by introducing the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who leverage resources and social positioning to initiate divergent change and transform institutional arrangements. Research in this stream demonstrates that change agents can reshape regulatory frameworks, introduce new governance standards, and alter industry norms (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Yet despite its contributions, institutional entrepreneurship theory presents two limitations.

First, it emphasizes field-level transformation - focusing on structural outcomes such as new institutions, regulatory regimes, or professional standards (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Less attention is paid to the micro-level cognitive processes through which leaders render previously illegitimate ideas acceptable. That is, while institutional entrepreneurship explains that change occurs, it does not sufficiently theorize how leaders strategically expand cognitive boundaries before structural transformation crystallizes.

Second, institutional entrepreneurship research often foregrounds collective mobilization and coalition-building as primary mechanisms of change (Battilana et al., 2009). While essential, this emphasis under-theorizes leadership cognition and framing as intentional strategies aimed at shifting what stakeholders perceive as economically, politically, or morally feasible.

Legitimacy theory further enriches this discussion by distinguishing among pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic legitimacy arises from perceived self-interest alignment; moral legitimacy from normative approval; cognitive legitimacy from taken-for-grantedness. Transformational institutional shifts typically require movement across these legitimacy layers (Tost, 2011). However, existing scholarship does not explicitly model how leaders orchestrate staged transitions across these legitimacy types in high-uncertainty environments.

This gap becomes particularly salient in contexts of technological and normative disruption. For example:

- Early corporate net-zero commitments were initially framed as economically unrealistic but later institutionalized as fiduciary responsibility (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010).
- AI audit and governance mechanisms were initially viewed as innovation constraints but are increasingly institutionalized as risk management necessities (Ransbotham et al., 2020).
- ESG disclosure standards moved from voluntary reputational signals to quasi-mandatory governance expectations (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014).

In each case, leaders engaged not only in institutional work but in normative boundary reframing, redefining what was considered strategically legitimate. These processes involve framing contests, narrative construction, sequencing strategies, and symbolic positioning (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Kaplan, 2008).

Overton Leadership extends institutional theory by introducing a window-shifting mechanism that conceptualizes leadership as an intentional strategy of legitimacy boundary expansion. Rather than focusing solely on structural institutional change, Overton Leadership models the cognitive-strategic processes through which leaders expand the “zone of acceptability” before institutional stabilization occurs.

Specifically, the model proposes that:

- Institutional environments define a bounded legitimacy window.
- Leaders can deliberately shift this window through staged pragmatic, moral, and cognitive reframing.
- Legitimacy expansion precedes institutional stabilization.
- Window-shifting constitutes a distinct strategic capability beyond adaptation or traditional institutional entrepreneurship.

In doing so, Overton Leadership integrates institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), and framing research (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) into a unified leadership model. It shifts leadership research from adaptation within norms to transformation of normative boundaries under conditions of uncertainty.

## **2.3 Complexity and Legitimacy in Socio-Technical Systems**

Complexity leadership theory (CLT) reconceptualizes leadership as an emergent phenomenon arising from interactions within adaptive systems rather than as a top-down authority function (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Drawing on complexity science, CLT distinguishes between administrative leadership (formal control structures), adaptive leadership (emergent problem-solving dynamics), and enabling leadership (the facilitation of adaptive conditions). In this view, organizations are complex adaptive systems characterized by nonlinear interactions, distributed intelligence, and continuous co-evolution with their environments (Marion & Uhl-Bien,

2001; Plowman et al., 2007).

While this framework advances leadership theory beyond hierarchical command models, it under-specifies a crucial dimension: the intentional reshaping of normative constraints. Complexity leadership explains how adaptive responses emerge under conditions of uncertainty, but it is less explicit about how leaders deliberately intervene in the legitimacy structures that delimit what adaptation is possible in the first place.

In socio-technical systems - where digital infrastructures, algorithmic governance, institutional logics, and stakeholder expectations intersect - adaptation alone is insufficient (Geels, 2002; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). These systems are governed not only by technical constraints but by deeply embedded normative frameworks that define acceptable behavior, ethical standards, and strategic boundaries. As Scott (2014) argues, institutions provide regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars that stabilize expectations. Complexity theory recognizes distributed adaptation within these systems but does not fully theorize how leaders strategically shift those pillars.

This limitation becomes particularly salient in AI-driven societies, ESG transitions, and digital platform governance.

### **2.3.1. AI Governance**

Artificial intelligence systems introduce probabilistic decision-making, algorithmic opacity, and ethical risks related to bias, accountability, and surveillance (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Pasquale, 2015). Early AI deployment prioritized efficiency and innovation. However, as AI increasingly shapes hiring, credit allocation, policing, and healthcare, legitimacy concerns have intensified (Zuboff, 2019).

The central leadership challenge is not merely adaptive integration of AI technologies but the redefinition of what constitutes legitimate AI use. Leaders must move stakeholders from viewing governance as a constraint to seeing it as a precondition for sustainable innovation (Ransbotham et al., 2020). This requires legitimacy reconfiguration across pragmatic (risk reduction), moral (fairness), and cognitive (taken-for-granted necessity) dimensions (Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011).

Complexity leadership explains distributed adaptation to technological uncertainty but does not specify how leaders intentionally expand the normative window of acceptable governance practices. Overton Leadership addresses this gap by conceptualizing legitimacy expansion as a strategic capability.

### **2.3.2 ESG and Sustainability Transitions**

Similarly, sustainability transitions represent not only technological shifts but institutional reconfigurations (Geels, 2011). The move toward net-zero commitments and ESG reporting was initially perceived as economically burdensome and strategically optional (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Over time, through framing, coalition-building, and

normative reframing, sustainability has become institutionalized as fiduciary responsibility (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014).

Institutional theory describes this as field-level transformation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and complexity theory explains systemic co-evolution. Yet the micro-level leadership processes that shifted the legitimacy boundaries - from “optional CSR” to “mandatory ESG governance” - remain under-theorized.

Sustainability transitions involve moving ideas across legitimacy stages:

1. From radical and economically unrealistic,
2. To strategically prudent,
3. To morally expected,
4. To cognitively taken-for-granted.

These transitions are not emergent accidents; they are frequently orchestrated through narrative framing, symbolic positioning, and incremental normalization strategies (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Kaplan, 2008). Complexity leadership accounts for adaptive emergence but not for deliberate normative boundary expansion.

### **2.3.3 Digital Platform Governance**

Digital platforms such as Meta, Google, and X operate as socio-technical ecosystems governed by algorithms and user communities (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014). Platform governance decisions - content moderation, data use, algorithmic transparency - are deeply legitimacy-laden.

Initially, platforms framed themselves as neutral infrastructure providers. Increasing regulatory scrutiny and societal backlash have shifted expectations toward responsible governance (Gillespie, 2018). Leaders in these firms are not merely adapting to complexity; they are navigating contested legitimacy terrain.

The core leadership challenge becomes legitimacy reconfiguration under systemic uncertainty. Leaders must anticipate normative shifts, shape public discourse, and redefine acceptable platform practices before regulatory enforcement crystallizes (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

### **2.3.4 Legitimacy Reconfiguration as the Central Leadership Problem**

Across AI governance, ESG transitions, and platform regulation, the recurring pattern is clear:

- The primary challenge is not technical adaptation.
- It is normative boundary expansion.
- It is the movement of ideas from “unacceptable” to “inevitable.”

Complex adaptive systems theory explains nonlinear interactions and distributed learning (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Westley et al., 2013), but it lacks a formal mechanism for modeling intentional legitimacy shifts. Institutional theory explains field-level change but underemphasizes leadership cognition and window sequencing.

Overton Leadership integrates these literatures by proposing that leaders in complex socio-technical systems perform a distinct function:

*They strategically expand the legitimacy window to enable adaptive transformation.*

In highly fragmented environments (Luo, 2022), resilience and sustainability depend not only on adaptability but on the capacity to redefine what is legitimate before systemic collapse or regulatory shock occurs.

Thus, in AI-driven and ESG-governed societies, leadership is no longer merely adaptive or enabling. It becomes normative-architectural, reshaping the cognitive and moral infrastructure within which adaptation unfolds.

## **2.4 The Overton Window as a Foundational Analogy for Leadership Strategy**

The concept of the Overton Window, originally developed in political theory, refers to the range of ideas considered socially and politically acceptable at a given time (Lehman, 2006; Mackinac Center for Public Policy). It defines the “window of discourse” within which policy proposals can be advocated without appearing radical or illegitimate. Ideas outside this window are dismissed as extreme, unthinkable, or politically infeasible.

Crucially, the Overton Window is not static. It shifts over time through advocacy, narrative framing, social movements, and strategic communication. What was once considered unthinkable may gradually become mainstream policy. This dynamic feature makes the Overton Window particularly relevant for understanding leadership in environments characterized by institutional rigidity and normative resistance.

The traditional Overton spectrum is often conceptualized as a progression:

Unthinkable → Radical → Acceptable → Sensible → Popular → Policy

This spectrum represents degrees of legitimacy and perceived feasibility within a given socio-political context.

### **Parallel: From Political Discourse to Organizational Legitimacy**

Overton Leadership extends this logic from public policy into organizational and socio-technical systems.

**Table1:** In corporate, AI, ESG, or institutional contexts, leaders face similar legitimacy constraints:

Political Overton Window	Organizational Parallel
Unthinkable	Strategically Impossible
Radical	Normatively Risky
Acceptable	Discussable
Sensible	Strategically Justifiable
Popular	Stakeholder-Supported
Policy	Institutionalized Practice

Source: Authors' own research

In organizations:

- “**Unthinkable**” may correspond to early AI governance regulation in tech firms.
- “**Radical**” may describe early net-zero commitments.
- “**Acceptable**” might be pilot sustainability programs.
- “**Policy**” becomes formal ESG compliance embedded into governance systems.

The movement along this spectrum is not accidental - it is actively shaped by leadership behavior.

## Theoretical Translation: Overton Window → Overton Leadership

The Overton Window describes *what society accepts*, while Overton Leadership describes *how leaders intentionally shift what is accepted*.

Thus:

- The Overton Window is Descriptive.  
Overton Leadership is Strategic and Prescriptive.

Where the original theory explains why some ideas are politically viable, Overton Leadership explains how leaders expand viability within organizations and institutional systems.

## **Dynamic Model Parallel**

### **In political systems:**

Social movements + framing + advocacy → Shift public opinion → Shift policy window

### **In organizational systems:**

Narrative reframing + incremental normalization + trust building → Shift stakeholder cognition → Expand legitimacy window → Enable strategic transformation

This establishes a structural isomorphism between political legitimacy dynamics and organizational transformation dynamics.

## **Why This Matters in AI-Driven and ESG Contexts**

In contemporary environments:

- AI governance once appeared as an innovation-killing bureaucracy.
- Carbon neutrality was viewed as shareholder-hostile.
- Data privacy regulations were framed as anti-growth.

Yet today:

- AI oversight is increasingly institutionalized.
- ESG reporting is mainstream.
- Sustainability metrics are board-level priorities.

These transitions were not merely adaptive responses. They required legitimacy expansion. This is precisely the domain of Overton Leadership.

## **Conceptual Advancement**

The Overton Window provides:

- A legitimacy spectrum.
- A dynamic understanding of normative evolution.
- A mechanism for understanding policy change.

Overton Leadership builds upon it by:

1. Embedding it in organizational theory.
2. Introducing leadership agency into legitimacy shifts.
3. Formalizing narrative mediation mechanisms.
4. Integrating institutional entrepreneurship and complexity theory.

*Overton Leadership is the strategic and intentional expansion of organizational legitimacy boundaries through narrative reframing, incremental normalization, and trust-based stakeholder alignment, enabling ideas to move from perceived impossibility to institutionalized policy.*

### **3. Conceptual Model of Overton Leadership**

#### **3.1 Core Constructs**

The model comprises five central constructs:

1. **Legitimacy Window (LW)**  
The perceived range of acceptable strategic options within a stakeholder ecosystem.
2. **Perceived Strategic Impossibility (PSI)**  
The degree to which transformative options are considered infeasible or unacceptable.
3. **Narrative Reframing Capability (NRC)**  
Leadership's ability to redefine meaning through strategic communication and symbolic action.
4. **Stakeholder Cognitive Realignment (SCR)**  
Observable shifts in stakeholder perception regarding acceptable strategies.
5. **Strategic Option Expansion (SOE)**  
Increase in implementable transformative strategies previously deemed unacceptable.

#### **3.2 Overton Leadership Process Model**

##### **Stage 1: Constraint Recognition**

Leader identifies misalignment between strategic necessity and legitimacy window.

##### **Stage 2: Strategic Reframing**

Narrative reframing, pilot initiatives, symbolic acts.

##### **Stage 3: Boundary Testing**

Incremental introduction of controversial or innovative practices.

##### **Stage 4: Legitimacy Expansion**

Stakeholder normalization of previously radical strategy.

##### **Stage 5: Institutionalization**

The expanded window becomes the new baseline norm.

### **4. Formal Theoretical Equation Model**

(Overton Leadership as Legitimacy-Shift Dynamic System)

We model Overton Leadership (OL) as a dynamic legitimacy-shifting function within complex adaptive systems.

## Core Constructs (Latent Variables)

- $LW_t$  = Legitimacy Window at time t
- $PSI_t$  = Perceived Strategic Impossibility
- $NRC_t$  = Narrative Reframing Capability
- $SCR_t$  = Stakeholder Cognitive Realignment
- $SOE_t$  = Strategic Option Expansion
- $T_t$  = Organizational Trust
- $V_t$  = Environmental Volatility

## Structural Model

### (1) Legitimacy Constraint Function

$$PSIt = f(LW_{t-1}, V_t) \quad PSI_t = f(LW_{t-1}^{-1}, V_t) \quad PSIt = f(LW_{t-1}, V_t)$$

Perceived strategic impossibility increases as the legitimacy window narrows and volatility rises.

### (2) Cognitive Realignment Equation

$$SCR_t = \alpha_1 NRC_t + \alpha_2 T_t + \alpha_3 (NRC_t \times T_t) + \varepsilon_1 \quad SCR_t = \alpha_1 NRC_t + \alpha_2 T_t + \alpha_3 (NRC_t \times T_t) + \varepsilon_1$$

Narrative reframing influences stakeholder realignment.

Trust moderates the reframing effect.

### (3) Legitimacy Expansion Dynamic

$$LW_{t+1} = LW_t + \beta_1 SCR_t - \beta_2 InstitutionalResistance + \varepsilon_2 \quad LW_{t+1} = LW_t + \beta_1 SCR_t - \beta_2 InstitutionalResistance + \varepsilon_2$$

Window expansion depends on cognitive realignment minus institutional resistance.

### (4) Strategic Option Expansion Function

$$SOEt+1 = \gamma_1 LW_{t+1} + \gamma_2 V_t + \varepsilon_3 \quad SOEt+1 = \gamma_1 LW_{t+1} + \gamma_2 V_t + \varepsilon_3$$

As legitimacy expands, feasible strategic options increase.

## Dynamic Feedback Loop

$$LW_{t+2} = LW_{t+1} + \delta SOEt+1 \quad LW_{t+2} = LW_{t+1} + \delta SOEt+1$$

Strategic implementation feeds back into legitimacy normalization.

## System-Level Interpretation

Overton Leadership is the rate of change in the legitimacy window:

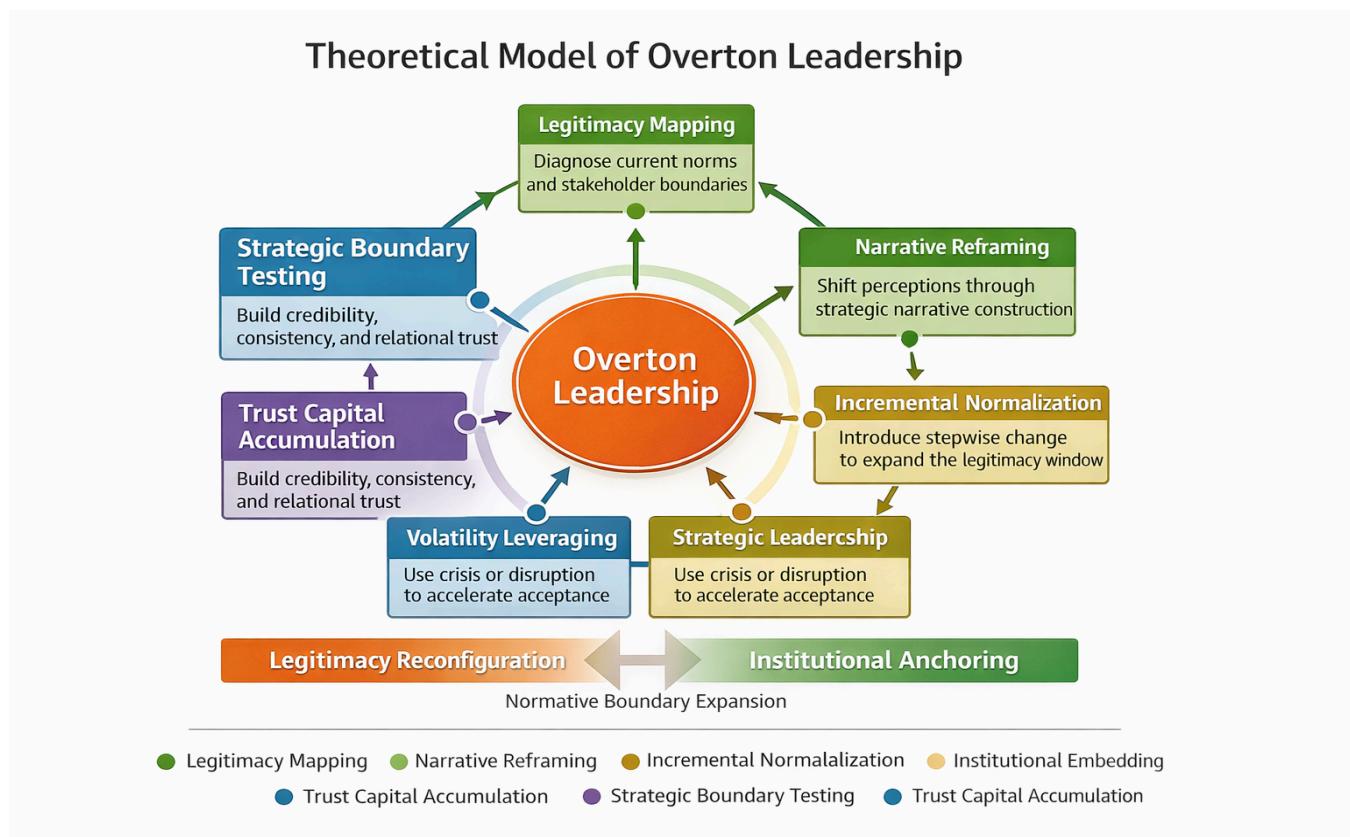
$$OL = \frac{dLW}{dt} = \frac{\Delta LW}{\Delta t}$$

Leadership effectiveness is therefore measurable as:

$$O_{\text{eff}} = \frac{\Delta LW}{\Delta t} = \frac{\Delta LW}{\Delta t}$$

This formalization enables empirical testing via:

- Longitudinal panel modeling
- SEM (Structural Equation Modeling)
- System dynamics modeling
- Bayesian updating models



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Overton Leadership and Legitimacy Window Expansion**

Source: Authors' own research

### P1: Legitimacy Constraint Proposition

**Proposition 1:** *The narrower the legitimacy window, the higher the need for Overton Leadership behavior to enable strategic transformation.*

In institutional environments characterized by tightly bounded normative expectations, organizations face restricted strategic discretion. Institutional theory suggests that legitimacy pressures constrain organizational behavior through regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995). When the legitimacy window is narrow, strategic alternatives that deviate from established norms are perceived as unacceptable, unrealistic, or risky. Under such conditions, adaptation alone is insufficient because adaptive change presupposes that strategic alternatives are already considered legitimate within the field. The more constrained the normative boundaries, the more leaders must engage in deliberate boundary-expanding behaviors rather than incremental adaptation.

Overton Leadership becomes particularly necessary in these contexts because it operates not within existing legitimacy structures but upon them. Leaders must actively reframe assumptions, challenge cognitive lock-in, and construct narratives that gradually shift stakeholder perceptions. In sectors such as AI governance, ESG compliance, or digital regulation, narrow legitimacy windows initially positioned governance mechanisms as anti-innovation. Only through sustained leadership efforts - reframing governance as risk mitigation, strategic foresight, and ethical necessity - did these practices move into the realm of acceptable strategy. Thus, legitimacy constraint increases the demand for deliberate window-shifting behavior.

## **P2: Narrative Mediation Proposition**

**Proposition 2:** *Narrative reframing capability mediates the relationship between perceived strategic impossibility and stakeholder cognitive realignment.*

Strategic ideas often begin as cognitively rejected proposals. When stakeholders perceive a solution as economically infeasible, technologically premature, or normatively inappropriate, the primary barrier is not structural but interpretive. Framing theory emphasizes that leaders influence strategic outcomes by shaping how issues are defined, interpreted, and emotionally evaluated (Kaplan, 2008; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Perceived impossibility is therefore not merely a rational assessment - it is a socially constructed judgment embedded in shared meaning systems.

Narrative reframing acts as the mediating mechanism that transforms perceived impossibility into cognitive plausibility. Through storytelling, symbolic articulation, and issue linking, leaders reposition controversial initiatives within broader, socially valued narratives (Boal & Schultz, 2007). For example, early corporate net-zero commitments were reframed from "cost burdens" to "risk hedges" and "future competitiveness strategies." Similarly, AI governance was reframed from regulatory friction to trust infrastructure. Thus, narrative reframing does not directly produce transformation; it alters cognitive frames, which then enable stakeholder realignment and acceptance.

## **P3: Incremental Normalization Proposition**

**Proposition 3:** *Incremental boundary testing increases the likelihood of legitimacy window expansion compared to abrupt radical change.*

Institutional environments resist sudden normative discontinuities. Research on institutional change suggests that gradualism is often more effective than abrupt rupture because it reduces cognitive dissonance and threat responses (Greenwood et al., 2002; Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). Radical shifts can trigger defensive institutional backlash, regulatory scrutiny, or stakeholder withdrawal. By contrast, incremental normalization allows stakeholders to adjust interpretive frames progressively.

Overton Leadership therefore operates through controlled boundary testing - introducing small-scale pilots, symbolic commitments, and experimental practices that slowly shift expectations. Each incremental step reduces perceived deviation from norms, moving ideas from “unthinkable” to “discussable” to “acceptable.” This process resembles institutional layering, where new practices are grafted onto existing structures (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). For example, ESG reporting began as voluntary disclosure before evolving into standardized compliance. Incrementalism thus increases the probability of sustained legitimacy expansion by minimizing resistance while preserving strategic momentum.

#### **P4: Trust Moderation Proposition**

**Proposition 4:** *Organizational trust positively moderates the relationship between narrative reframing and stakeholder cognitive realignment.*

Trust functions as a relational lubricant in legitimacy reconfiguration processes. When stakeholders trust leaders, they are more willing to suspend disbelief and entertain proposals that initially fall outside normative boundaries (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). In low-trust environments, reframing attempts are interpreted as manipulation or opportunism. In high-trust environments, the same narratives are interpreted as visionary foresight.

Trust therefore strengthens the effectiveness of narrative reframing by lowering psychological resistance and enhancing interpretive openness. Leaders with established credibility can more successfully reposition contested ideas because stakeholders attribute benevolent intent and competence to them. For example, companies with strong reputational capital were able to introduce radical sustainability commitments with less investor backlash compared to firms lacking credibility. Thus, trust does not independently shift legitimacy windows; rather, it amplifies the capacity of reframing efforts to generate cognitive realignment.

#### **P5: Volatility Amplification Proposition**

**Proposition 5:** *In high-volatility environments, Overton Leadership accelerates legitimacy shifts compared to stable environments.*

Environmental volatility destabilizes taken-for-granted assumptions. Crisis conditions, geopolitical fragmentation, technological disruption, or market turbulence weaken institutional inertia by exposing the limitations of prevailing norms (Van der Vegt et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). Under high volatility, stakeholders become more receptive to alternatives that would otherwise appear radical. Crisis creates cognitive openings - windows of interpretive flexibility -

where established models lose explanatory power.

Overton Leadership capitalizes on this interpretive fluidity by accelerating legitimacy expansion during turbulent periods. When existing norms fail to provide stability, leaders can more effectively reframe new strategies as necessary responses rather than optional deviations. For instance, pandemic-induced digital acceleration normalized remote work practices that previously faced resistance. Similarly, financial crises legitimized regulatory interventions once deemed excessive. Thus, volatility functions as a contextual amplifier, increasing the speed and probability of successful legitimacy window shifts under Overton Leadership.

Figure 2 synthesizes the proposed theoretical relationships into an integrated path model. The diagram illustrates how Overton Leadership behaviors influence legitimacy window expansion through narrative reframing and incremental normalization, with trust and environmental volatility operating as key boundary conditions.

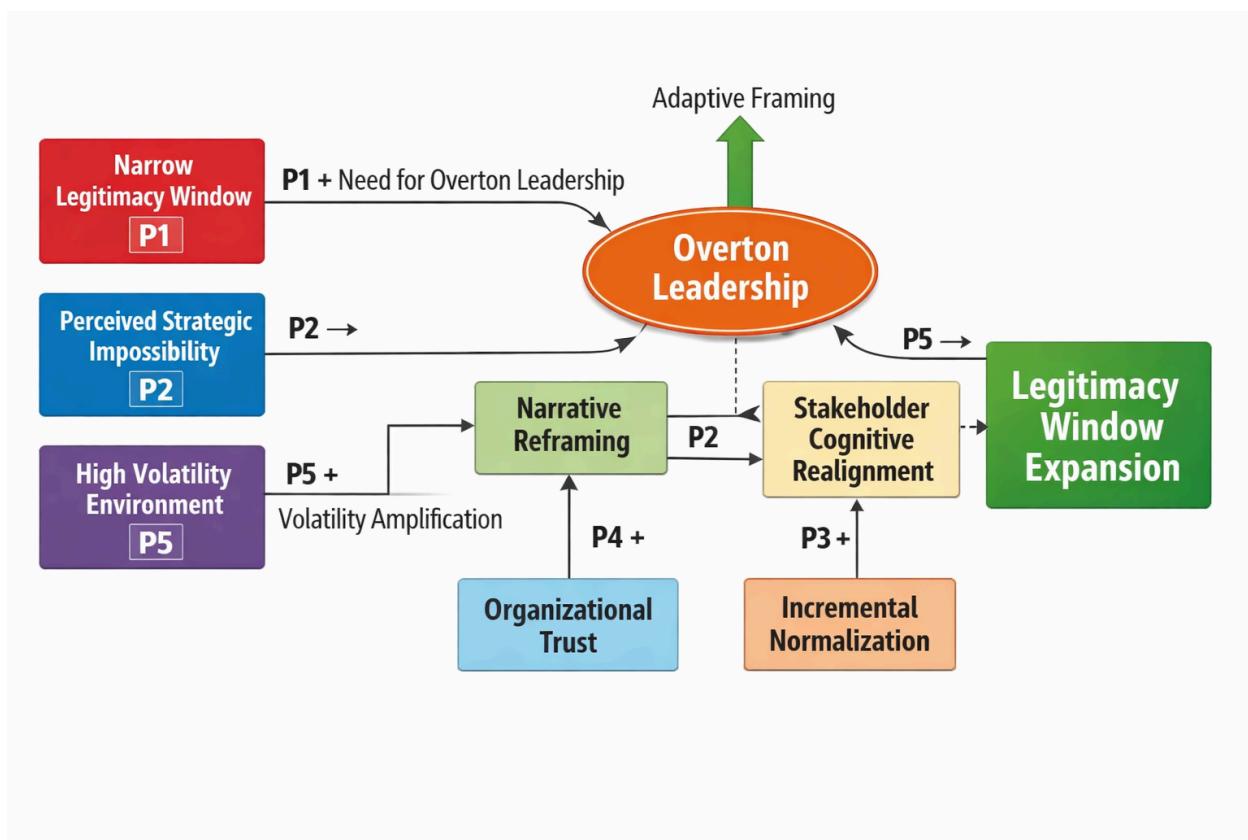


Figure 2. Theoretical Path Model of Overton Leadership - Source: Authors' own research.

## 5. Theoretical Contributions

### 5.1 Moving Leadership Theory from Adaptation to Normative Boundary Management

This study advances leadership theory by shifting its analytical focus from adaptation within existing institutional constraints to the active management of normative boundaries. While dominant frameworks such as adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 2016) emphasize mobilizing responses to environmental change, they largely assume the legitimacy of the strategic problem space. Overton Leadership extends this perspective by theorizing leadership as the intentional expansion of what is considered socially, politically, or economically possible. In doing so, it introduces *normative boundary management* as a core leadership function, particularly relevant in ESG transitions, AI governance, and digital regulation contexts where the central challenge is not operational execution but cognitive acceptability. This reframing elevates leadership from adaptive coordination to legitimacy architecture.

## **5.2. Integrating Institutional Entrepreneurship into Leadership Scholarship**

The model bridges leadership theory with institutional entrepreneurship research (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009) by relocating field-level change mechanisms into the domain of leadership cognition and strategy. While institutional entrepreneurship literature explains how actors reshape institutional fields, it often privileges structural positioning and collective mobilization over individual leadership processes. Overton Leadership contributes by conceptualizing how leaders intentionally deploy narratives, incremental normalization, and trust-building to shift legitimacy windows. This integration enriches both streams: leadership scholarship gains a field-level transformation mechanism, and institutional theory gains a more micro-founded account of strategic agency. The result is a multilevel bridge between cognitive reframing and institutional change.

## **5.3. Providing Measurable Constructs for Empirical Testing**

Unlike purely metaphorical treatments of the Overton Window, this study operationalizes the construct into measurable dimensions suitable for empirical testing. Key constructs - including perceived legitimacy window width, narrative reframing capability, incremental normalization intensity, stakeholder cognitive alignment, and organizational trust - can be operationalized through survey instruments, discourse analysis, sentiment analytics, and longitudinal field data. By specifying mediators and moderators within a path model, the framework enables structural equation modeling, multilevel regression, and experimental validation. This measurability strengthens the model's empirical tractability and aligns it with contemporary methodological standards in top-tier management research, moving the Overton concept from political metaphor to testable organizational theory.

## **5.4. Explaining Transformation Under Resistance**

Finally, the model contributes a theoretically grounded explanation of strategic transformation under conditions of resistance. Much of the change management literature focuses on overcoming inertia (Kotter, 1996) or managing resistance (Ford et al., 2008), yet it insufficiently theorizes how leaders alter the perceived legitimacy of contested strategies. Overton Leadership addresses this gap by identifying narrative mediation, incremental boundary testing,

and trust as mechanisms through which resistance is reframed rather than suppressed. This perspective reframes resistance not merely as opposition but as a signal of legitimacy boundary rigidity. Consequently, transformation becomes a cognitive and relational process of expanding collective possibility rather than imposing strategic change. This reconceptualization is particularly relevant in polarized socio-technical environments where stakeholder contestation is endemic rather than exceptional.

## 6. Distinction from Adaptive Leadership

Dimension	Adaptive Leadership	
Legitimacy Orientation	Mobilizes action within existing legitimacy boundaries	Intentionally expands legitimacy boundaries
Primary Focus	Stakeholder adaptation to recognized challenges	Stakeholder perception shift regarding what is acceptable
Analytical Center	Problem-centered (technical vs. adaptive challenges)	Legitimacy-centered (normative constraint vs. possibility space)
Strategic Posture	Responds to challenges within accepted solution space	Redefines acceptable solutions before adaptation occurs
Change Logic	Facilitates learning within current institutional norms	Reshapes institutional norms to enable new strategic trajectories

**Table 2: Overton Leadership Distinction from Adaptive Leadership**

Source: Authors' own research.

Overton Leadership should not be interpreted as a substitute for Adaptive Leadership, but rather as a meta-level strategic extension of it. Adaptive Leadership remains highly relevant when the legitimacy of a problem and its potential solution set are broadly acknowledged. However, in contexts where proposed strategies lie outside prevailing cognitive or normative boundaries - such as early ESG commitments, AI governance regulation, or radical business model transformation - adaptation alone is insufficient. In such cases, leaders must first expand the "window of acceptability" before mobilizing adaptive responses. Overton Leadership therefore operates upstream of adaptation, shaping the legitimacy conditions under which adaptive processes become possible. Conceptually, it complements Adaptive Leadership by addressing the prior question: not *how* organizations adapt, but *what* they are allowed to adapt toward.

## 7. Discussions and Results

### 7.1 Definition of Overton Leadership:

Overton Leadership is a strategic leadership capability defined as the intentional expansion, reframing, and repositioning of legitimacy boundaries in order to make previously unacceptable, unthinkable, or politically infeasible strategic options socially and institutionally viable.

It conceptualizes leadership not merely as adaptation within existing norms, but as the deliberate management of the *Overton Window* - the range of ideas, policies, and strategies considered legitimate at a given time. Overton Leadership operates by reshaping stakeholder cognition, altering institutional narratives, and incrementally shifting what organizations and societies perceive as acceptable, necessary, or inevitable.

In contrast to leadership models centered on problem-solving within constraints, Overton Leadership focuses on redefining the constraints themselves.

FiF

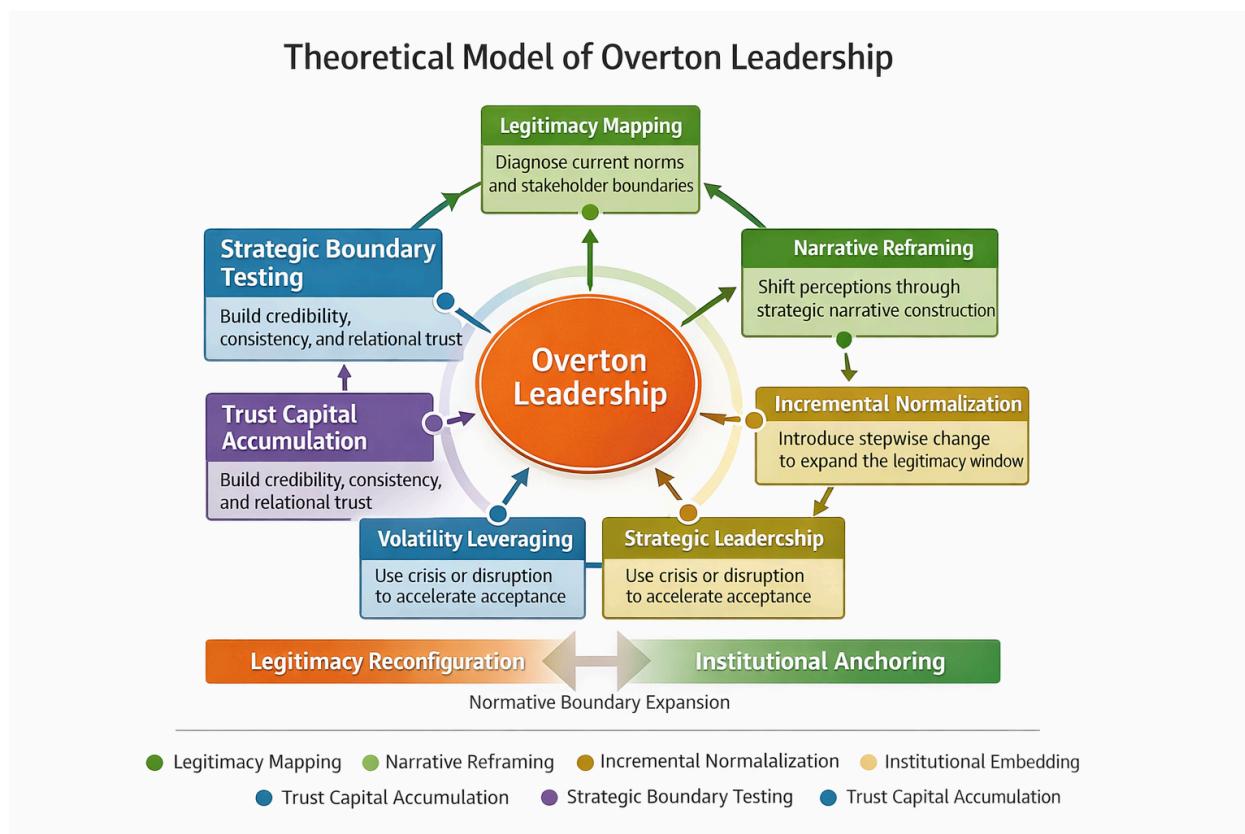


Figure 3: Theoretical Model of Overton Leadership

Source: Authors' own research.

## **7.2 Core Principles and Strategic Components of Overton Leadership**

Below are the foundational strategies/principles that define Overton Leadership, each explained conceptually and operationally.

### **7.2.1. Legitimacy Mapping**

**What it is:** A systematic assessment of current normative boundaries—identifying what stakeholders consider acceptable, controversial, or unacceptable.

**What it involves:**

- Diagnosing stakeholder beliefs, institutional norms, and regulatory sensitivities.
- Mapping the “center” and “edges” of the legitimacy window.
- Identifying taboo zones versus negotiable zones.

**Why it matters:** Transformation fails not because ideas are technically flawed, but because they fall outside legitimacy tolerance. Legitimacy mapping prevents premature radicalism and guides calibrated boundary expansion.

### **7.2.2. Narrative Reframing**

**What it is:** The deliberate reconstruction of meaning around a controversial or novel idea to reposition it within acceptable discourse.

**What it involves:**

- Changing the framing of issues (e.g., from “cost” to “investment”).
- Linking new proposals to shared values.
- Using storytelling to alter cognitive schemas.

**Why it matters:** Stakeholders rarely reject policies purely on rational grounds; they reject them because they violate perceived norms. Narrative reframing shifts perception before structural change.

### **7.2.3. Incremental Normalization**

**What it is:** A gradual introduction of boundary-shifting initiatives through small, manageable steps rather than abrupt radical change.

**What it involves:**

- Pilot programs.
- Phased policy introductions.

- Controlled experimentation.
- Low-risk symbolic commitments.

**Why it matters:** Abrupt radical change triggers defensive resistance. Incremental normalization increases exposure and reduces perceived threat, expanding legitimacy over time.

#### **7.2.4. Trust Capital Accumulation**

**What it is:** The intentional cultivation of credibility, integrity, and relational trust to create tolerance for controversial leadership moves.

**What it involves:**

- Transparent communication.
- Ethical consistency.
- Performance reliability.
- Demonstrated stakeholder concern.

**Why it matters:** Trust acts as a moderator. High trust environments allow leaders to shift norms more rapidly. Low trust environments narrow the window and amplify backlash.

#### **7.2.5. Strategic Boundary Testing**

**What it is:** The deliberate introduction of ideas slightly outside the current legitimacy boundary to measure reaction and recalibrate strategy.

**What it involves:**

- Controlled public statements.
- Trial balloons.
- Stakeholder consultation phases.
- Data-driven reaction analysis.

**Why it matters:** Legitimacy windows are dynamic. Leaders must test limits without destabilizing credibility. Boundary testing enables calibrated expansion.

#### **7.2.6. Volatility Leveraging**

**What it is:** Using crisis, disruption, or environmental instability as accelerators of legitimacy shifts.

### **What it involves:**

- Framing crises as proof of necessity.
- Positioning radical proposals as stabilizing responses.
- Linking urgency to normative change.

**Why it matters:** Volatility temporarily widens cognitive openness. Periods of instability are moments when Overton windows shift most rapidly.

### **7.2.7. Institutional Embedding**

**What it is:** Consolidating newly accepted norms into policies, routines, governance structures, and organizational identity.

### **What it involves:**

- Codifying new practices.
- Embedding change in strategy documents.
- Aligning incentives and metrics.
- Formal governance redesign.

**Why it matters:** Legitimacy shifts must become institutionalized to avoid regression. Without embedding, expanded windows contract.

## **7.3 Integrated Strategic Logic**

Overton Leadership operates through a structured sequence:

1. Map current legitimacy boundaries.
2. Reframe narratives to reduce cognitive resistance.
3. Introduce incremental normalization steps.
4. Accumulate trust capital.
5. Test and expand boundaries.
6. Leverage volatility where available.
7. Embed new legitimacy into institutional structure.

This transforms leadership from reactive adaptation to proactive legitimacy engineering.

## **8. Conclusion**

Overton Leadership is a strategic leadership capability through which actors intentionally expand the boundaries of institutional legitimacy by reframing narratives, incrementally normalizing contested ideas, leveraging trust and volatility, and embedding newly accepted norms into governance structures.

This article advances Overton Leadership as a novel conceptual lens that reconceptualizes leadership as the strategic management of legitimacy boundaries. In environments characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, AI-driven disruption, regulatory volatility, and ESG pressures, leadership effectiveness no longer depends solely on mobilizing adaptation within existing norms. Rather, it increasingly depends on the capacity to redefine what is considered acceptable, feasible, and strategically inevitable. By foregrounding legitimacy as the primary constraint on transformation, this framework shifts leadership scholarship from reactive problem-solving to proactive normative reconfiguration.

The model contributes to theory by positioning leadership as a boundary-shaping capability operating at the intersection of cognition, narrative, and institutional structure. Overton Leadership explains how leaders expand the strategic horizon of organizations by reframing perceived impossibilities, incrementally normalizing controversial proposals, and leveraging volatility to accelerate cognitive realignment. In doing so, it offers a processual explanation of transformation under resistance - an area insufficiently specified in adaptive leadership and complexity leadership theories. Transformation is not simply a matter of learning or coordination; it is a matter of legitimacy expansion.

Empirically, the framework provides measurable constructs - legitimacy window width, narrative reframing capability, stakeholder cognitive alignment, trust moderation, and volatility amplification - that can be operationalized in quantitative and qualitative designs. This opens a pathway for future multi-level testing across contexts such as AI governance, sustainability transitions, platform regulation, and public policy reform. By integrating insights from institutional entrepreneurship, legitimacy theory, and complexity leadership, the model offers a structured foundation for studying how strategic shifts become socially and politically viable over time.

Importantly, **Overton Leadership is not a replacement for Adaptive Leadership, but a meta-level strategic extension of it.** Adaptive Leadership assumes that the challenge and the legitimacy of the solution space are already acknowledged. Overton Leadership addresses an earlier and more fundamental stage: when the solution itself lies outside prevailing normative boundaries. In such contexts, leaders must first expand the window of acceptability before adaptive mobilization can occur. Thus, Overton Leadership operates upstream of adaptation - it shapes the cognitive and institutional conditions that make adaptation possible.

In sum, as societies confront systemic transitions driven by artificial intelligence, climate change, digital platforms, and socio-political fragmentation, leadership must evolve from managing change within constraints to reshaping the constraints themselves. Overton Leadership captures this emerging strategic imperative. It reframes leadership not merely as mobilization or coordination, but as the deliberate expansion of what organizations and societies are prepared to imagine, debate, and ultimately implement.

## 9. Limitations and Future Research

Future studies should:

- Empirically test constructs using multi-level modeling.
- Examine media and digital discourse as accelerators.
- Explore cross-cultural window variability.
- Integrate Overton Leadership with behavioral economics and framing theory.

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