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All In or Fold: Facing complex dilemmas of high - stakes decisions for large - scale infrastructure projects

Teaching Notes: The Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM)

Synopsis

The cancellation of the New Mexico City International Airport (NAIM) by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador represents one of the most controversial decisions in recent Mexican history. Initially conceived as a state - of - the - art infrastructure project to alleviate congestion at the existing airport, the NAIM was well underway, with billions of pesos already invested. However, upon taking office, Lopez Obrador cancelled the project, citing financial concerns, environmental issues, and a public consultation that favoured an alternative plan: converting the Santa Lucía military base into a commercial airport.

Rodrigo Montes de la Vega, a young and ambitious Chair of the Board of Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM), found himself at the centre of this controversy. As a key figure responsible for NAIM's development, Rodrigo faced a profound dilemma. Should he support the government's decision, preserving his career prospects but compromising his professional ethics and vision for the project? Or should he resist publicly, defending the NAIM's merits but risking professional isolation and losing his ability to influence future decisions?

This case examines Rodrigo's tension - filled decision - making process, offering students an opportunity to explore how leaders navigate high - stakes choices involving conflicting interests, uncertain outcomes, and organisational resistance to change.

Research Methodology

This case study is developed using secondary data from publicly available sources, including news articles, reports, and government publications about the cancellation of the NAIM. This approach is useful to understand individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena involving a contemporary set of events to explore the complexity and richness of the phenomenon of study, namely the termination of infrastructure megaprojects. While the details about Rodrigo Montes de la Vega and his role in Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM) are fictional, the scenario is inspired by real - world challenges and decision - making processes faced by leaders during the termination of large - scale infrastructure projects. By combining factual context with a fictional character, the case provides a realistic but imaginative framework for analysing leadership dilemmas, organisational resistance to change, and the broader implications of political decisions on public projects.

Target Audience

This case is designed for students and professionals in engineering, business management, and public policy who are interested in project management, organisational change, and leadership decision - making. The case is particularly suitable for courses focused on project governance, decision - making under uncertainty, and managing stakeholder resistance. It is versatile enough to be used at various academic and professional levels, including:

- Undergraduate programs: Ideal for students in engineering management or business, providing foundational insights into leadership dilemmas.
- Graduate programs (master's level): Suitable for MBA or specialised master's courses in project management, organisational behaviour, or public administration, where students can apply advanced frameworks.
- Executive education: Provides professionals with a practical, real - world scenario to refine their decision - making and leadership strategies.

The case encourages multidisciplinary thinking and fosters engagement among students from diverse academic backgrounds, making it a valuable teaching tool for institutions worldwide.

Learning Objectives

1. **Recognize the emotional and political complexities behind high - stakes leadership decisions.**
Through Rodrigo's dilemma, students will experience how leaders must weigh personal ethics, professional loyalty, and political survival - often under time pressure and uncertainty. They learn that decisions are rarely "clean" or purely rational.
2. **Experience the difficulty of preserving integrity when legitimacy is fragmented across audiences.**
By comparing Rodrigo's options (resist, align, hybridize), students come to understand how acting with integrity is complicated when different audiences (government, experts, public) hold incompatible expectations. They reflect on what it means to "do the right thing" when legitimacy is not unified.
3. **Practice taking and defending a position in the face of institutional ambiguity.**
In group discussion and presentations, students will not just analyse Rodrigo's options - they will have to choose, defend, and articulate a course of action, often negotiating disagreement with peers. They learn that leadership requires stance, not just analysis.
4. **Reflect on how narratives - more than facts - shape what actions are possible or credible.**
Through the framing discussion, students confront how symbolic language, moral storytelling, and public sentiment can overpower technical evidence. They learn that knowing the right facts isn't enough: leadership also requires narrative awareness and communicative skill.

Theoretical Note

Project termination is traditionally defined as "the process that provides for acceptance of all activities consistent with closing out the project" (Pinto, 2022). It is often perceived negatively, as it is frequently associated with failure and seen as a significant waste of resources, particularly when policy and decision-makers select the wrong projects or launch initiatives that fail to exploit synergies (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Ika et al., 2022; Locatelli et al., 2023). However, scholars argue that termination should not necessarily be considered a failure but rather a strategic decision made when a project no longer aligns with an organization's objectives, emphasizing that a well-developed project does not necessarily warrant continued support (Cleland & Ireland, 2006). For the phenomenon of the case, the focus is on early project termination, which is defined as the "withdrawal of resources from projects without the original objectives/purpose having been fully met." (Tadisina, 1986).

The theoretical lenses selected for this case were chosen for their explanatory power and pedagogical clarity rather than for theoretical exhaustiveness. Institutional Theory and Framing

Theory allow students to meaningfully engage with issues of legitimacy, power, and decision-making without requiring extensive prior theoretical knowledge.

Main Theory: Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory offers a powerful lens through which to understand the dilemma faced by Rodrigo Montes de la Vega, as well as the broader institutional dynamics that shaped the fate of the Mexico City New International Airport (NAIM).

Institutional theory posits that the behaviour of individuals and organizations is strongly influenced by formal and informal rules, norms, and belief systems in their environment. Organizations and leaders are often compelled to conform to these institutional pressures to maintain legitimacy, even when such conformity may conflict with technical efficiency or personal beliefs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995).

While the case is grounded in the specific context of Mexico, the dynamics it illustrates are not context-bound. Political transitions frequently trigger shifts in dominant institutional logics, altering what is perceived as legitimate, acceptable, or necessary in public megaprojects. In such moments, technical rationality is often displaced by symbolic, moral, or populist narratives. The NAIM case therefore exemplifies a broader pattern in global megaproject governance, where institutional disruption and reframing reshape decision-making far beyond the original project context.

In the NAIM case, Rodrigo Montes de la Vega, Chair of the Board of Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM), is caught between competing institutional expectations. On one hand, his role as a technical leader aligns him with the professional norms of transparency, strategic planning, and efficiency. On the other hand, the new administration under President López Obrador represents a shift in institutional logic, prioritizing populism, fiscal austerity, and a narrative of anti - elitism.

Rodrigo's professional identity and the legacy of the NAIM project are embedded in a technocratic vision of modern infrastructure. Yet, the political environment has changed. Institutional legitimacy now demands alignment with a new set of values and symbols. Supporting NAIM could position Rodrigo as out of touch or resistant to democratic will, while supporting its cancellation might undermine his credibility among professional peers.

This case asks students to explore how institutional change impacts individual agency, and how leaders can navigate legitimacy in shifting environments. Should Rodrigo adapt to maintain influence, or resist and potentially lose his platform? How can he frame his actions to align with evolving institutional expectations while preserving his core values?

Additional Perspective: The Framing Theory

The Framing Theory can be used as a complementary perspective to Institutional Theory, illustrating how political actors use language and symbolism to redefine legitimacy and influence institutional perceptions.

The Framing Theory elucidates how public perception and decision - making can be shaped by the presentation of information, leading to choices that may deviate from rational analysis. Recognizing the influence of framing is crucial for leaders and policymakers to navigate complex decisions effectively.

The Framing Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) is a cognitive bias that demonstrates that individuals' decisions are significantly influenced by the manner in which information is presented, rather than solely by the information itself. Specifically, people tend to avoid risks when options are framed positively (emphasizing gains) but are more inclined to take risks when the same options are framed negatively (highlighting losses). Recent research continues to underscore the profound impact of framing on decision - making. For example, it has been seen that linguistically different descriptions of equivalent options frequently lead to preference reversals, especially in situations involving risk (Kühberger, 2023).

In the NAIM case, the Framing Theory played a pivotal role during the public referendum organized by President López Obrador. The presentation of information to the public was strategically framed:

- Negative Framing of NAIM: The project was portrayed as “corrupt, elitist, and wasteful,” tapping into public sentiments against corruption and government excess.
- Positive Framing of AIFA: The alternative project, the Felipe Ángeles International Airport (AIFA), was presented as a “modest, nationalistic, and just solution,” aligning with the government's anti - corruption narrative.

This strategic framing influenced public perception by appealing to emotions and moral values, such as justice and national pride, rather than encouraging a rational evaluation based on technical efficiency, sunk costs, or long - term socioeconomic benefits.

For a technically oriented leader like Rodrigo, this environment posed a significant challenge: advocating for a data - driven, rational decision in a context dominated by emotionally charged narratives and ideological framing.

From an analytical perspective, Framing Theory allows students to examine not only *what* decision was taken, but *how* the range of acceptable options was socially constructed. In the NAIM case, framing reshaped the decision space by redefining technical continuation as morally illegitimate, while presenting project termination as ethically and politically necessary. This perspective helps students apply framing analysis to other large-scale infrastructure decisions, where political narratives can override technical assessments and reconfigure what leaders perceive as viable or defensible choices.

Importantly, the interaction between institutional change and framing processes is not unique to the NAIM case. Across large-scale public infrastructure projects, political transitions often enable new actors to reframe existing projects as symbols of corruption, excess, or elite failure, even when technical assessments remain unchanged. Framing thus becomes a mechanism through which institutional change is enacted and justified, reshaping decision spaces and legitimizing project termination or redirection in diverse socio-economic and political contexts.

Together, Institutional Theory and Framing Theory provide a transferable analytical lens that can be applied to public-sector megaprojects facing political disruption across different national, institutional, and socio-economic contexts.

Instructions

1. Preparation Phase (Before the Class Session)

- Familiarise with Theories: Ensure students have been introduced to the key concepts of Institutional Theory (and the Framing Theory, if you choose to use it) in prior lectures or assigned readings. You can refer to the suggested reading list as a reference. Provide a concise summary of these theories to reinforce their understanding, focusing on how institutional pressures - coercive, normative, and mimetic - shape individual and organizational behaviour.
- Read the Case Study: Assign the fictional case of Rodrigo Montes de la Vega as required reading. Encourage students to take notes, highlighting the key dilemmas, stakeholders, and potential strategies Rodrigo might consider considering changing institutional logics and expectations.

2. Group Formation and Setup (10 minutes)

- Divide the class into groups of 4–6 students (ideal size: 5).
- Assign each group a dedicated workspace (separate classroom areas or breakout rooms if online).
- Share the Discussion Questions and clarify the overall session flow.
- Provide access to the case text, flipcharts/slides, and any relevant frameworks (e.g., VRIO, institutional logics, framing strategies).

3. Group Work: Discussion and Presentation Preparation (90–120 minutes)

- Each group discusses the set of case discussion questions, drawing on Institutional Theory and Framing Theory to support their reasoning.
- Encourage them to take a stance on Rodrigo's options and explore the implications of different choices.
- Emphasize the importance of using both analytical reasoning and personal judgment.
- Each group prepares a **10-minute presentation** that:
 - Synthesizes their responses to the discussion questions highlighting dilemmas, trade-offs, and institutional tensions.
 - Includes one slide (or flipchart) summarizing personal perspective: "*If you were Rodrigo, what would you do—and what values would guide your decision?*"

Discussion Questions (see answers to discussion questions at page 6):

1. How might Institutional Theory explain Rodrigo's reluctance to abandon the NAIM project, despite increasing political pressure? What institutional forces are likely shaping his decision?
2. If Rodrigo decides to resist the cancellation, how can he maintain legitimacy within a shifting institutional environment? What strategies could he use to balance professional identity with political adaptation?
3. Rodrigo is aware that supporting the NAIM may now conflict with dominant political narratives - but abandoning it could compromise professional values and sectoral legitimacy. How can leaders act when institutional logics are in conflict?

Additional Discussion Questions (Only if you choose to use the Framing Theory):

4. In what ways did the public framing of NAIM's cancellation shape Rodrigo's decision space? How can leaders challenge dominant narratives when those narratives conflict with technical or institutional values?

5. If Rodrigo chooses to support the government's position, how can he reframe the project shift in a way that maintains credibility and aligns with the new institutional logic?
6. How can understanding both Institutional Pressures and Framing Theories help leaders like Rodrigo navigate public decision - making? What safeguards could be implemented to promote better governance under conflicting institutional logics?

4. Group Presentations (60–90 minutes)

- Each group presents for **10 minutes**.
- After each presentation, allow **2–3 minutes** for comments or questions from other students or the instructor.
- Encourage active listening and respectful debate. Suggest that students **note areas of divergence** across presentations (e.g., different framings, ethical trade-offs, leadership strategies).

5. Class-Wide Discussion and Collective Reflection (45–60 minutes)

The instructor facilitates an open, guided discussion that helps students consolidate learning:

- **Compare and contrast** the strategies proposed by each group.
- **Discuss the implications** of Rodrigo's choices for leadership under pressure, institutional legitimacy, and communication.
- **Reflect on values and identity:** What happens when professional ethics and political alignment are in conflict?
- Invite students to share their **personal perspective**: *"If you were Rodrigo, what would you do—and what values would guide your decision?"*
- Optionally, run an anonymous poll (e.g., Mentimeter or show of hands) to visualize the split of opinions in the room.

6. Wrap-Up and Key Takeaways (20–30 minutes)

- Summarize the main insights that emerged across group work and class discussion.
- Reinforce the value of Institutional Theory in explaining how leaders and organisations navigate decisions under shifting institutional logics. Emphasize how legitimacy (not only technical rationality) guides action, and how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures shape what is considered acceptable or strategic in changing political environments.
- Emphasize the influence of the Framing Theory in shaping public discourse and stakeholder perceptions. Discuss how emotionally charged narratives can redefine legitimacy, reinforcing or undermining institutional positions independently of technical evidence.
- Highlight the practical importance for leaders of recognizing and navigating institutional and discursive constraints. Stress the need for critical thinking, ethical clarity, and strategic communication when facing politicized, high - stakes decisions.
- Instructors may invite students to compare the NAIM case with other public megaprojects affected by political turnover (e.g., transport infrastructure, energy transitions, or urban redevelopment), encouraging reflection on how institutional change and framing processes recur across national and governance contexts.

- Optional: Invite discussion of other real - world examples (e.g., infrastructure megaprojects, public health policy shifts, or controversial divestments) where institutional pressures or public framing significantly influenced the course of action and perceived legitimacy.

Answers to Discussion Questions:

1. *How might Institutional Theory explain Rodrigo's reluctance to abandon the NAIM project, despite increasing political pressure? What institutional forces are likely shaping his decision?*

Rodrigo's hesitation to abandon the NAIM project can be best understood through the lens of Institutional Theory, which explains how individuals' decisions are shaped by the institutional environment in which they operate - through formal rules, social norms, and shared belief systems. Rather than viewing Rodrigo's behaviour as purely personal or rational, Institutional Theory reveals how he is embedded in a web of legitimacy pressures, facing conflicting expectations from different institutional arenas. This theoretical lens is useful because it shows why actors conform, resist, or adapt, depending on which logics they are trying to serve.

Institutional Theory identifies three types of institutional pressures that help explain Rodrigo's behaviour:

1. Coercive Pressures

Political authority and formal expectations from the government

Rodrigo operates within a state - owned organisation (GACM), where his mandate and survival depend on alignment with the ruling political administration. Following the election of President López Obrador, a new institutional logic emerged - emphasising fiscal austerity, anti - corruption, and nationalist symbolism - replacing the previous administration's vision of international competitiveness and long - term infrastructural planning.

- Supporting the NAIM may now be seen as disloyal or insubordinate, placing Rodrigo's position and career at risk.
- These coercive pressures stem from the centralised power of the Mexican presidency, which exerts strong influence over public appointments and budget allocations.
- Rodrigo's consideration of drafting a letter of support for the new plan reflects an awareness that compliance may be necessary for institutional survival.

Institutional Theory is useful here because it shows that conformity is not necessarily an endorsement of values - it is often a response to formal power dynamics and survival logic within hierarchical systems.

2. Normative Pressures

Professional norms and identity from the infrastructure and engineering community

Rodrigo's career and identity are rooted in the technocratic logic of long - term planning, transparency, technical expertise, and evidence - based decision - making. The NAIM project had the backing of engineering colleges, infrastructure experts, and international consultants - many of whom argued that cancelling the airport was wasteful and shortsighted.

- Supporting the government’s decision would mean abandoning these professional values and may harm Rodrigo’s reputation among peers.
- Professional associations publicly opposed the cancellation, reinforcing the normative expectation that Rodrigo should defend the project as a matter of technical integrity.

Institutional Theory helps us understand why Rodrigo feels torn - not just politically, but ethically. He is not simply choosing a job over values; he is navigating a conflict between professional legitimacy and political loyalty.

3. Mimetic Pressures

Learning from others in contexts of uncertainty

Faced with intense ambiguity and high stakes, Rodrigo may be looking to how others in similar roles have responded during times of political transition. Some technocrats choose to align and reframe their work to fit the new discourse; others resign in protest.

- Rodrigo’s preparation of two letters (resignation vs. support) suggests he is exploring different “scripts” of acceptable leadership behaviour.
- Mimetic pressures are strong in uncertain environments, where imitating successful or “safe” responses becomes a way to reduce personal and institutional risk.

Institutional Theory shows that behaviour is often patterned through imitation, especially when rules and expectations are unclear. Rodrigo is likely weighing which model of leadership will allow him to preserve influence and legitimacy under new conditions.

2. If Rodrigo decides to resist the cancellation, how can he maintain legitimacy within a shifting institutional environment? What strategies could he use to balance professional identity with political adaptation?

This question invites students to explore how leaders can maintain legitimacy when acting against dominant political expectations. If Rodrigo chooses to resist the cancellation of the NAIM project, he will need to carefully manage his visibility, messaging, and alliances to preserve credibility both within his professional community and the broader institutional field.

Institutional Theory shows that legitimacy is socially constructed - what is seen as legitimate is shaped by the expectations of different stakeholders. In a shifting institutional environment, Rodrigo must act strategically to preserve legitimacy across multiple arenas, even when resisting dominant political pressures.

1. Recognising Institutional Plurality – Navigating Competing Logics

Rodrigo’s challenge lies in balancing two conflicting institutional logics:

- The technocratic logic of efficiency, expertise, and long - term infrastructure planning
- The political logic of populism, fiscal austerity, and symbolic nation - building

By choosing to resist, Rodrigo risks being seen as disloyal to the new administration. But he may retain or even enhance legitimacy in the professional field by framing his stance as principled and evidence - based, rather than oppositional.

Key insight from Institutional Theory: Legitimacy is contextual and audience - dependent. Rodrigo can lose legitimacy in one arena (e.g., politics) while gaining it in another (e.g., professional or public discourse).

2. Soft Resistance – Resisting Without Confrontation

Instead of outright defiance, Rodrigo might adopt a strategy of soft resistance:

- Emphasise continuity and public interest, not personal opposition.
- Use technical data, reports, and international benchmarks to support his case.
- Invoke values like institutional memory, sunk public investment, and efficiency, rather than directly criticising the new administration.

For example, Rodrigo might say:

“Based on the evidence we have gathered; our team continues to believe that NAIM represents the most viable and cost - effective solution for the country’s long - term connectivity.”

This allows him to signal integrity and commitment to public value without entering a confrontational narrative.

3. Strategic Framing – Reclaiming the Narrative

Rodrigo can reframe his resistance as aligned with the same public values promoted by the government (e.g., justice, transparency, fiscal responsibility), while still defending NAIM.

- Recast the project as a social investment, not an elite - driven initiative.
- Point to the cost of cancellation (USD 16B), the technical consensus from engineering colleges, and the lack of feasibility of the alternative (AIFA) as reasons for public concern.
- Use accessible language and inclusive framing to reach beyond the elite technical community.

This helps Rodrigo challenge the dominant frame (e.g., NAIM = corruption) by offering a counter - frame (e.g., NAIM = responsible, sustainable, national development).

4. Building Strategic Alliances – Amplifying Legitimacy

Rodrigo should not act alone. He can:

- Collaborate with respected professional associations, academic institutions, and civil society actors to amplify a shared message.
- Seek independent endorsements from international aviation or infrastructure organisations (e.g., ICAO, IATA).
- Encourage a multi - stakeholder conversation about infrastructure planning and legitimacy.

This collective approach spreads the risk and frames resistance as a broad institutional concern, not personal defiance.

5. Legitimacy Through Procedural Integrity

Even while resisting, Rodrigo can gain legitimacy by:

- Ensuring transparent internal processes at GACM.
- Respecting formal mandates and institutional procedures.
- Offering to collaborate on independent evaluations of both NAIM and AIFA.

This shows Rodrigo is not clinging to power but advocating for institutional integrity and due process.

Conclusion

If Rodrigo chooses to resist the cancellation of NAIM, he must do so in a way that navigates shifting institutional expectations while protecting his core professional identity. Institutional Theory suggests that:

- Legitimacy is not a fixed asset - it must be actively managed and strategically constructed.
- Rodrigo's strategy must reconcile professional values with political sensitivity, using framing, alliances, and procedural credibility to uphold his position.
- Resistance does not require defiance; it can take the form of principled advocacy, technical rigour, and public - oriented leadership.

3. Rodrigo is aware that supporting the NAIM may now conflict with dominant political narratives - but abandoning it could compromise professional values and sectoral legitimacy. How can leaders act when institutional logics are in conflict?

This question invites students to examine how leaders respond when institutional logics collide - in this case, when the logic of political responsiveness clashes with the logic of professional expertise and integrity. Institutional Theory is especially powerful here, as it highlights how organisational actors are embedded in institutional fields composed of multiple, often competing, normative systems.

Rodrigo is caught between two dominant and incompatible logics:

- Political Logic: The newly elected government promotes a populist, anti - elite, fiscally austere narrative, which frames the NAIM as corrupt, excessive, and illegitimate.
- Professional/Technocratic Logic: The engineering and infrastructure community, both nationally and internationally, defends the NAIM as technically sound, socially beneficial, and economically necessary.

Institutional Theory is useful here because it provides tools to understand how actors like Rodrigo experience institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) and face legitimacy trade - offs when responding to multiple, conflicting expectations.

1. Recognising Institutional Complexity – No Single “Right” Answer

Leaders in institutional fields often face incompatible prescriptions. Supporting one logic may come at the cost of legitimacy in another.

- For Rodrigo, alignment with political authority may protect his career but damage his credibility among professionals.
- Conversely, defending the NAIM may uphold sectoral legitimacy but provoke sanctions or exclusion from the political field.

Leaders must therefore recognise that legitimacy is plural and situational. No choice will satisfy all audiences. The key is to navigate tensions without fully capitulating to one side.

2. Hybridisation – Bridging Conflicting Logics

Rather than fully adopting one logic, Rodrigo can pursue a hybrid strategy, selectively combining elements from both logics to craft a position that is intelligible and legitimate across fields.

- For example, he could propose modifications to NAIM that integrate government concerns (e.g., phasing development, increasing transparency, incorporating military use), while preserving the technical value of the project.
- This approach shows that Rodrigo is responsive but not submissive, aiming to find common ground without abandoning core principles.

Hybridisation allows leaders to frame themselves as translators or mediators between systems, building cross - field credibility.

3. Strategic Framing – Redefining the Terms of Debate

Rodrigo can use framing techniques to recast the conflict itself:

- Instead of presenting the issue as “NAIM vs. AIFA” or “technocracy vs. democracy,” he could frame it as a public accountability challenge:

“How can we ensure that infrastructure decisions reflect both expert judgment and citizens’ needs?”
- He can appeal to higher - order values (e.g., national development, intergenerational responsibility, democratic governance) that transcend the binary opposition.

This strategy can reposition Rodrigo not as a rebel or technocrat, but as a leader working for convergence, thereby softening perceived resistance.

4. Selective Decoupling – Protecting Identity While Adapting Symbolically

In situations of deep conflict, actors may practice selective decoupling: publicly complying with dominant expectations, while internally maintaining alternate logics or practices.

- Rodrigo might issue a neutral or formal statement of alignment with the government’s authority, while working quietly with professional networks to document the lessons of NAIM and preserve institutional memory.

Though ethically delicate, this can be a pragmatic approach when legitimacy must be preserved across domains and overt resistance is too costly.

5. Exit, Voice, or Loyalty – Classic Responses to Logics in Conflict

As Hirschman (1970) suggests, when institutional alignment becomes impossible, leaders face three choices:

- Exit: Resign and preserve integrity, hoping to influence from outside.
- Voice: Stay and attempt to reform or challenge the dominant logic.
- Loyalty: Suppress personal or professional concerns to maintain institutional position.

Ask students to debate which of these options Rodrigo might choose and under what conditions each becomes the most responsible or strategic course.

Conclusion

Institutional Theory teaches us that conflicting logics are common in complex organisational fields, especially during periods of political or symbolic change. Leaders like Rodrigo:

- Do not face a simple choice but must manage competing expectations across domains of power and meaning.
- Must carefully craft hybrid strategies, frame issues strategically, and decide when to resist, adapt, or withdraw.
- Act not only to make decisions, but to maintain legitimacy, identity, and influence in shifting fields.

Answers to Additional Discussion Questions (Only if you choose to use the Framing Theory):

4. In what ways did the public framing of NAIM's cancellation shape Rodrigo's decision space? How can leaders challenge dominant narratives when those narratives conflict with technical or institutional values?

This question allows students to integrate Framing Theory with Institutional Theory to understand how public discourse shapes - not just reflects - the options available to leaders. Rodrigo's dilemma is not only institutional (political vs. professional logics), but also discursive: the way the NAIM project has been framed in public debate narrows or constrains the range of legitimate actions he can take.

1. Framing as Constraint – Redefining What Is “Acceptable”

According to Framing Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; De Martino et al., 2006), the way a choice is presented significantly alters how people perceive it and respond.

- In this case, the NAIM project was framed by the incoming administration as:
 - A symbol of corruption, elite interests, and fiscal irresponsibility.
 - A wasteful megaproject that served private over public interests.
- In contrast, the alternative project (AIFA) was framed as:
 - A modest, nationalistic, and ethical solution aligned with “the people.”

This framing made public opposition to NAIM appear morally superior, while technical support for it appeared elitist or corrupt - even if based on evidence.

For Rodrigo, this limits his decision space: defending NAIM now risks being interpreted not as professional conviction, but as alignment with discredited or self - serving interests.

2. The Power of Symbolic Framing – Emotional vs. Rational Logics

The NAIM debate illustrates how emotionally charged narratives (e.g., nationalism, anti - corruption, people vs. elites) can override technical reasoning.

- Even though experts and engineers widely supported the NAIM, the symbolic power of the government’s framing reshaped institutional legitimacy.
- Rodrigo must now operate in a space where rational arguments are less persuasive than symbolic appeals.

This shows how leaders can become discursively disempowered - not because their data is wrong, but because the narrative climate has shifted.

3. Challenging Dominant Narratives – Strategies for Counter - Framing

Leaders like Rodrigo can resist narrative constraints by engaging in counter - framing. This involves introducing alternative ways of seeing the issue that:

- Align with public values
- Reclaim moral legitimacy
- Undermine the dominant frame’s credibility

Counter - framing strategies might include:

- Value reframing: Recasting the NAIM as an investment in intergenerational equity, climate resilience, or regional development, rather than as elitist excess.
- Narrative flipping: Suggesting that cancelling NAIM may itself represent a new form of irresponsibility - one that wastes public funds and ignores technical consensus.
- Evidence - based storytelling: Using accessible, compelling stories or visuals (e.g., images of abandoned NAIM infrastructure) to humanise technical arguments.

These strategies help Rodrigo reopen discursive space, allowing professional or technical logics to regain legitimacy without confronting political power directly.

4. Coalition - Building and External Legitimacy

Rodrigo can also expand his narrative credibility by joining voices with others who represent different forms of legitimacy:

- Professional associations (e.g., engineering colleges)
- Civil society actors (e.g., “No más derroches” movement)
- International organisations (e.g., ICAO, IATA)

By building coalitions, Rodrigo shows that his message is not isolated or self - serving, but part of a broader, evidence - based concern.

This strategy enhances discursive legitimacy and diffuses the risk of being labelled as oppositional or elitist.

5. Communicative Leadership – Leading Through Narrative

To challenge dominant frames effectively, Rodrigo must embody communicative leadership:

- Be transparent and consistent in messaging
- Anticipate misinterpretations and proactively address them
- Frame decisions not as “against the government,” but as “for the country”

He must show that technical values are not in opposition to public good, but essential to it.

Conclusion

The public framing of NAIM’s cancellation redefined the institutional environment by shifting legitimacy from technical authority to symbolic politics. This constrained Rodrigo’s options and made professional resistance riskier.

However, Framing Theory shows that leaders are not powerless in this context. Through counter - framing, coalition - building, and value - based messaging, Rodrigo can reshape the narrative space in ways that:

- Re - legitimize professional knowledge
- Reconnect technocratic values with public sentiment
- Challenge political discourse without provoking direct confrontation

5. If Rodrigo chooses to support the government’s position, how can he reframe the project shift in a way that maintains credibility and aligns with the new institutional logic?

If Rodrigo decides to support the government’s cancellation of the NAIM project, he faces a reputational dilemma: how to avoid appearing opportunistic or disloyal to his professional community, while adapting to a new political reality. This question invites students to explore how leaders can use framing strategies and institutional alignment techniques to reposition themselves within a shifting field of legitimacy.

1. From Resistance to Strategic Alignment – Accepting Institutional Change

According to Institutional Theory, institutional environments are dynamic. When a new dominant logic emerges (in this case, populist austerity and nationalist symbolism), actors must choose between resisting or adapting.

- By choosing to align, Rodrigo signals that he recognises the legitimacy of the new institutional order and is willing to contribute constructively.
- His challenge is to reframe this shift as a continuity of public service, rather than a personal compromise.

Instructors can stress that adaptation does not necessarily mean betrayal. Institutional Theory helps students see that actors can find new ways to express old values within new frames.

2. Strategic Framing – Recasting the Shift as Responsiveness

Rodrigo can maintain credibility by reframing the cancellation as a democratic and pragmatic decision, and his support as a gesture of responsiveness, not surrender.

Suggested reframing narratives:

- Democratic Responsiveness:

“As public servants, we must listen when the people speak. The consultation process made it clear that we need to rethink how we approach major infrastructure.”

- Institutional Renewal:

“This is an opportunity to rebuild trust in infrastructure planning by starting fresh, with stronger accountability and citizen engagement.”

- National Unity:

“The country needs solutions that unite, not divide. I’m committed to ensuring that the new airport serves Mexico’s long - term needs with the same commitment to excellence.”

This allows Rodrigo to preserve a value - based identity (e.g. public interest, transparency, equity) even while endorsing a change in direction.

3. Repositioning NAIM as a Learning Experience

Instead of defending the NAIM or denying its weaknesses, Rodrigo can:

- Acknowledge past mistakes or blind spots, especially around communication or community engagement.
- Frame NAIM as a lesson in the risks of technocratic detachment and the need for more inclusive governance.

This shows humility, maturity, and aligns with the government’s anti - elitist framing, without rejecting the technical merit of the original project.

It also helps Rodrigo transform his identity from project defender to reform - minded leader capable of learning and evolving.

4. Bridging Institutional Logics – Synthesising Values

Rodrigo can act as a bridge between the outgoing and incoming institutional logics. He can:

- Advocate for the new airport (AIFA) to inherit best practices from NAIM, such as environmental standards, stakeholder engagement, or transparency tools.
- Encourage technical continuity across projects, promoting institutional memory and knowledge transfer rather than abrupt rupture.

This reinforces that Rodrigo’s support is not partisan, but grounded in a commitment to improving public infrastructure, regardless of the project label.

5. Signalling Commitment Through Action

Credibility is preserved not only through messaging, but through visible, value - consistent action. Rodrigo can:

- Lead a review committee to ensure AIFA meets national and international standards.
- Establish stakeholder dialogue mechanisms to integrate public concerns from the start.
- Promote open data platforms and transparent reporting, reinforcing the values he upheld at NAIM.

These actions allow him to demonstrate continuity of integrity, even in a changed political landscape.

Conclusion

Supporting the government's position does not require abandoning professional identity or values. Through framing, symbolic alignment, and practical contributions, Rodrigo can:

- Preserve his legitimacy as a public - oriented, technically competent leader
- Adapt to the new institutional logic without appearing opportunistic
- Transform his role from project advocate to guardian of quality and accountability in the new era

6. How can understanding both Institutional Pressures and Framing Theories help leaders like Rodrigo navigate public decision - making? What safeguards could be implemented to promote better governance under conflicting institutional logics?

This question invites students to synthesize two core theoretical lenses - Institutional Theory and Framing Theory - to develop a nuanced understanding of how leaders operate in politicized, high - stakes environments. It also pushes students to think beyond Rodrigo's personal dilemma and consider systemic safeguards that could improve governance in contexts shaped by competing logics.

1. Institutional Theory: Understanding Why Leaders Feel Trapped

Institutional Theory explains that leaders are embedded in institutional fields composed of different, and sometimes competing, logics of legitimacy.

- Rodrigo is navigating coercive pressures from political authorities, normative pressures from his professional field, and mimetic pressures from peers.
- Understanding these pressures helps leaders recognize that tension is not failure - it is a normal condition in complex institutional settings.

By making these logics explicit, leaders can reflect on their position, identify where they hold legitimacy, and choose their response more strategically (e.g., adapt, hybridize, resist, exit).

2. Framing Theory: Understanding How Meaning Is Constructed

Framing Theory highlights that decisions are not made in a vacuum - they are shaped by how options are presented, interpreted, and emotionally charged in public discourse.

- In the NAIM case, framing was used to transform a technical project into a moral narrative: NAIM = corruption and elitism; AIFA = justice and nationalism.
- Leaders like Rodrigo must recognise how public narratives shape what counts as legitimate or credible, and how technical knowledge can be silenced by symbolic politics.

Understanding framing allows leaders to:

- Anticipate how their actions will be perceived
- Craft alternative narratives grounded in shared public values
- Communicate more effectively in emotionally charged environments.

3. Integrating the Two Theories – Seeing Power and Perception Together

When used together, Institutional and Framing Theory provide a powerful map of constraint and opportunity:

- Institutional Theory shows the structural forces that limit action (e.g., political control, professional standards).
- Framing Theory reveals the discursive forces that shape perception (e.g., media narratives, emotional appeals).

Leaders who understand both can:

- Identify which pressures are institutional (rules, legitimacy) and which are discursive (narratives, symbols).
- Develop strategies that maintain credibility in both spaces - structural and symbolic.

4. Practical Safeguards for Better Governance

The case highlights that public decision - making becomes dysfunctional when institutional logics clash without mechanisms for negotiation. To promote better governance, systems should implement safeguards such as:

a. Transparent Deliberation Channels

- Create independent, cross - sector platforms for dialogue between technical experts, public officials, and civil society.
- This prevents the dominance of one logic (e.g., populist or technocratic) and encourages mutual accountability.

b. Participatory Decision - Making

- Formalise citizen engagement processes that are broad - based, structured, and informed - not ad hoc or emotionally framed.
- Public consultations should include technical education components to raise the quality of input.

c. Independent Oversight Bodies

- Strengthen institutions like audit authorities, engineering colleges, and planning councils, giving them voice and visibility.
- These can act as stabilizers during political transitions.

d. Narrative Responsibility

- Encourage leaders and media to engage in responsible framing - highlighting complexity, avoiding moral simplification, and acknowledging trade - offs.
- Teach communicators and public managers how to frame with integrity rather than manipulation.

Conclusion

Understanding both institutional pressures and framing dynamics enables leaders like Rodrigo to:

- Diagnose the invisible constraints they operate under (institutional legitimacy and discursive norms)
- Communicate and act more effectively within multiple, often conflicting, systems
- Navigate ambiguity by making informed, ethically grounded, and politically aware decisions

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