

The Cynefin Framework

enabling constraints, loosely coupled

- unordered: relationship between cause and effect can only be established in hindsight ("dependent origination")
- unknown unknowns
- starting point and questions to ask are unclear
- actions change the situation in unpredictable ways
- instructive patterns can emerge
- reductionist approach will fail
- requires high level of communication and interaction

probe-sense-respond

create a safe environment for experimentation

1. probe (explore)
2. sense (inspect)
3. respond (adapt)

Emergent Practice

complex

organizations, communities, ecosystems, battlefields, markets

crises, disasters

chaotic

lacking constraints, de-coupled

- unordered: relationship between cause and effect is unclear
- confusing situation
- immediate containment is essential, there is often no time to look for the root cause or to get detailed input
- requires direct communication (top-down or broadcast)

act-sense-respond

1. act to establish order: take charge, triage, contain
2. sense where stability lies
3. respond to turn the chaotic into the complex

Novel Practice

↻ knowledge increases counterclockwise

unordered: (left side) cause and effect can be deduced only with hindsight or not at all

sense-analyze-respond

1. sense: assess the facts
2. analyze
3. respond: apply the appropriate good operating practice

Good Practice

complicated

domain of experts: lawyers, engineers, surgeons, intelligence analysts

legal structures, standard operating procedures

obvious

tightly constrained, no degree of freedom

- ordered: stable and clear relationship between cause and effect
- single correct answer
- problem is well known

sense-categorize-respond

1. sense: establish the facts
2. categorize: which rule or practice applies?
3. respond: follow the rule or apply best practice

Best Practice

Complacency, "entrained thinking", or attempts to force a situation into the obvious domain through a reductionist approach might result in a catastrophic clockwise shift into the chaotic domain.

ordered: (right side) cause and effect are known or can be discovered

Different Situations Require Different Ways of Navigation

The Cynefin framework was created by Dave Snowden as a "sense-making device", a conceptual framework that provides people with a "sense of place" (the Welsh word cynefin means "habitat") that helps selecting the appropriate methodology for decision-making and responding to a situation. The Cynefin framework distinguishes between four different types of situations (called "domains" or "realms"): Obvious (simple), complicated, complex and chaotic.

Disorder

In disorder people are in constant firefighting mode, they do not agree what needs to be done, work with bad processes and act according to personal preferences. To escape disorder, break down the situation into smaller parts which can be assigned to one of the four "domains".