

MENTAL MODELS

THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK

KNOWING WHERE WE ARE HELPS US KNOW HOW TO ACT

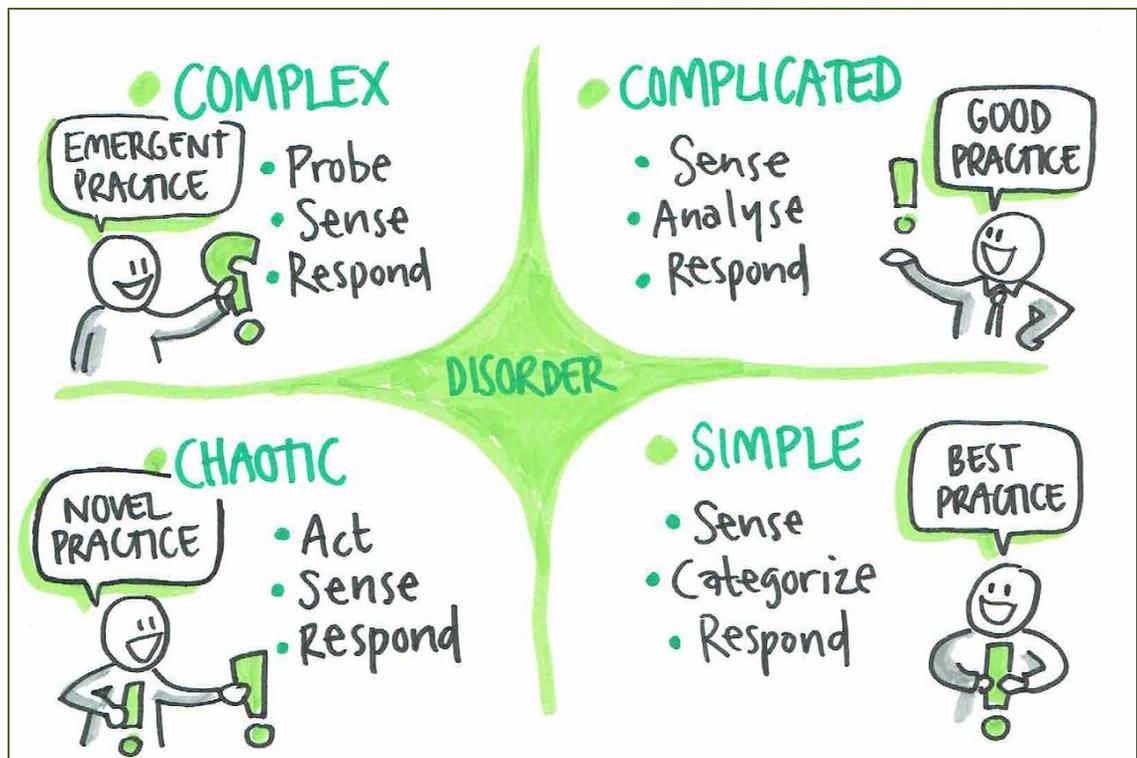
DESCRIPTION AND CORE PRINCIPLES:

Developed by the Welsh researcher Dave Snowden, the "Cynefin framework" distinguishes five domains of reality that a given system may represent; the framework classifies the systems by their state of complexity and order, and offers advice on what strategy to adopt to impact each.

Simple, in which the relationship between cause and effect is obvious to all, the approach is to *Sense - Categorise - Respond* and we can apply *best* practice. This is the area we know from the assembly line. The factory work environment constrains any actor so much, that they are left with few options and perform as the system instructs them to do.

Complicated, in which the relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or some other form of investigation and/or the application of expert knowledge. The approach is to *Sense - Analyze - Respond* and we can apply *good* practice. This is the area of the "expert" that knows better than the actors how the system's relationships actually fit best together. The experts design the way to follow and sound managers implement this advice. Note that in the "complicated" domain, there are linear cause-effect relationships, but there are so many and not obvious that some expert insight is necessary to find a good way through.

Complex, in which the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect, but not in advance, the approach is to *Probe - Sense - Respond* and we can sense *emergent* practice. Here the system's relationships are mutually influenced by the actors' behavior. Thus, it is impossible to discern causal relationships in advance; and experts fail as much as anyone else in trying so. Leading in complexity is a game of trial and learning. The art is to launch a number of different possible actions together and see what works better. Those are then amplified, and the less effective ones might be stopped or revised. Here we work on the basis that we understand that we do not know the best way in advance.



Chaotic, in which there is no relationship between cause and effect at systems level, the approach is to *Act - Sense - Respond* and we can discover *novel* practice. Leading in Chaos is stressful, as the whole system is in stress mode. Systems tend to be unstable and fall from chaotic into simple. This is a catastrophic collapse, as the simplification brought into the system tends to overdo and to suppress the inherent complexity and the system might re-collapse back into chaos again. The way to stabilise chaotic situations is by Acting-Sensing. That is acting at large scale at once (there is no time left for trying), until the chaos stabilizes into 'normal' complexity where further actions can be tested.

The fifth domain is **Disorder**, which is the state of not knowing what type of causality exists and in which state people will revert to their own comfort zone in making a decision.

The new perspective gained by this is the view from complexity. **Leading in complexity is actually simple**. It suffices to maintain a number of **high quality learning nodes** around constant experiments about what could be a new or improved way of acting in the face of constantly fresh constellations; in a world where all actors have some large degree of freedom constrained lightly through boundaries and rules of the system.

References:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mqNcs8mp74> (A brief explanation of the Cynefin framework)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Miw92eZaJg> (how you organize a birthday party for thirteen year old boys using the various domains of systems)