

The Cynefin Framework – Defining A Collaborative Problem or Opportunity

Overview: The Cynefin Framework

Not all problems require the same approach. In fact, by understanding the nature of the problem the collaborative or community is facing, we can better determine a strategy or strategies to resolve that problem, dilemma, or opportunity.

The Cynefin Framework, developed by David Snowden, provides a way of understanding different types of problems which face organizations, collaboratives, and communities. The Cynefin Framework was first published in a November 2007 issue of the [Harvard Business Review](#).

Different Types of Problems:

Obvious or simple

problems can be solved by following a recipe. The solution is obvious and can be achieved through independent action.

Complicated or technical

problems require the application of expert or content knowledge. Often, complicated problems benefit from collaborative actions.

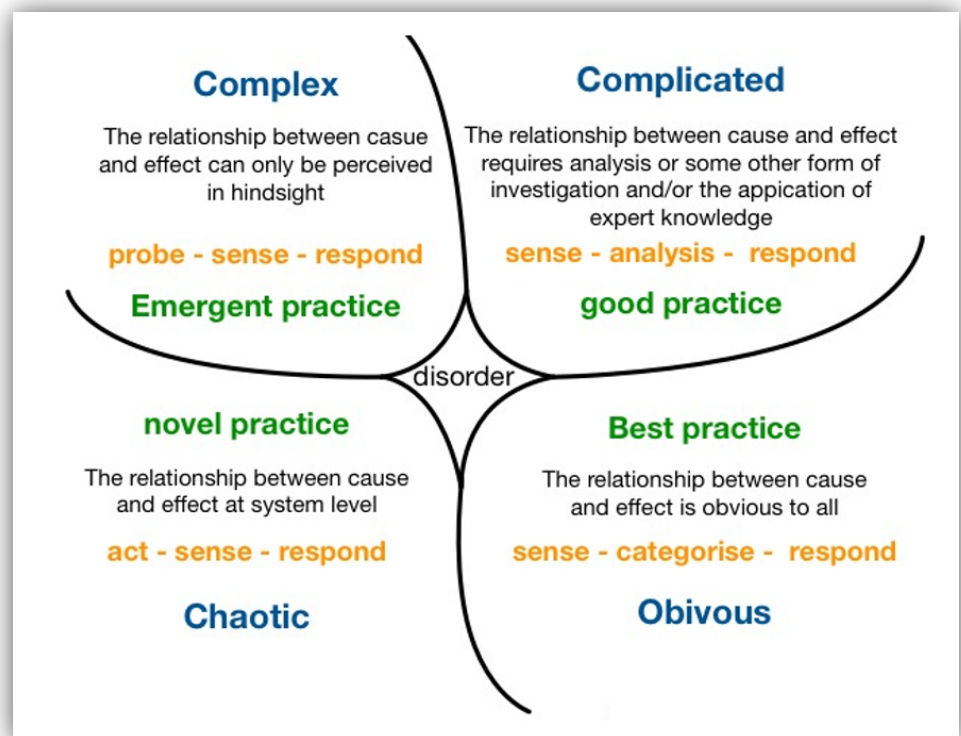
Complex problems

present more challenges and require the involvement of individuals with both content and context information. Examples of complex problems

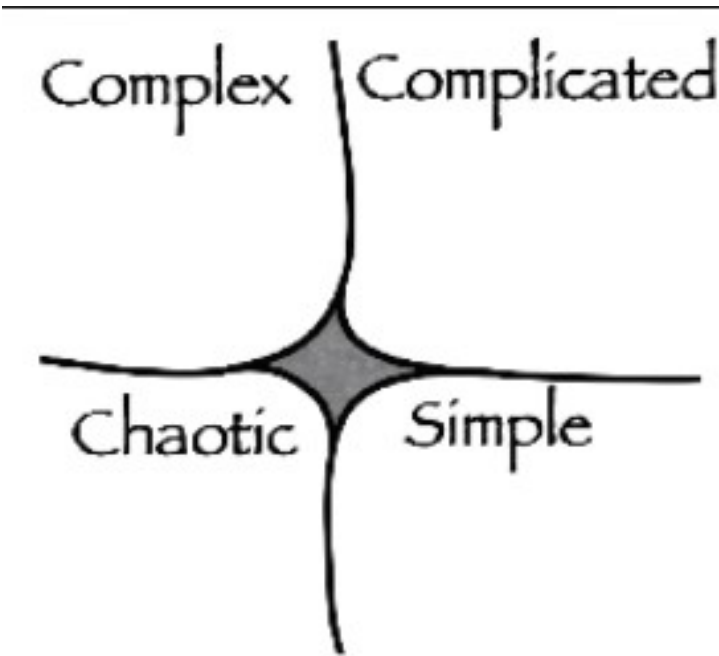
include solving poverty, addressing homelessness, and building community resilience. The relationship between the cause of the problem and effect are not always clear.

Chaotic problems require quick action to address the source of the problem. Innovation may occur during the action which may lead to systems level shifts, changes, or impacts.

The Cynefin Framework is useful for diagnosing different problems and determining a strategy for addressing the problem. It is also useful to note that embedded in complex problems there might be elements which can be simple, complicated, or chaotic. This tool helps to consider the different elements of the collaborative challenge.



Step 1: Defining the Collaborative Challenge or Problem

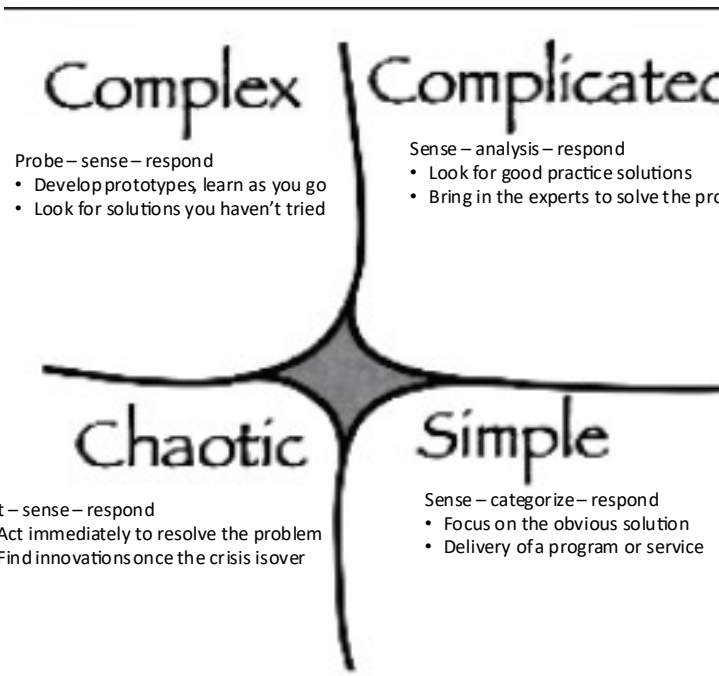


The diagram shows the Cynefin Framework with four quadrants: Complex (top-left), Complicated (top-right), Chaotic (bottom-left), and Simple (bottom-right). The center is a dark grey star shape. A horizontal line is above the top two quadrants. To the right is a light blue box for notes.

The Collaborative Problem / Opportunity:

What parts of your problem are found in the different sections of the Cynefin Framework? Place the parts of the problem in the sections that apply.

Step 2: Determine your Strategy or Solution Approach



The diagram is identical to Step 1 but includes strategy descriptions for each quadrant. The light blue box for notes is also present.

The Collaborative Problem / Opportunity:

Describe how you might develop a collaborative problem-solving strategy in each of the sections.

Complex

Probe – sense – respond

- Develop prototypes, learn as you go
- Look for solutions you haven't tried

Complicated

Sense – analysis – respond

- Look for good practice solutions
- Bring in the experts to solve the problem

Chaotic

Act – sense – respond

- Act immediately to resolve the problem
- Find innovations once the crisis is over

Simple

Sense – categorize – respond

- Focus on the obvious solution
- Delivery of a program or service

Step 3: Reflection Questions

As you go through the process of defining the problem or challenge your collaboration is seeking to solve, consider the following questions.

1. What do we know already about the collaborative problem or opportunity?
2. What additional information might be helpful? What data is important?
3. What is the current community context? Are there others interested in or already working to resolve this problem?
4. Are there sufficient human and financial resources available? How might we secure the resources?
5. What questions do we have now? Is a collaborative effort necessary to solve this problem or opportunity?