Cynefin Framework

Idea In Short

The most effective leaders understand that problem solving is not a one-size-fits-all process. They know that their actions depend on the situation, and they make better decisions by adapting their approach to changing circumstances. But, how do you know which approach you should use in a particular situation? And how can you avoid making the wrong decision? The Cynefin framework is a tool that helps you make better decisions by assessing the situation you find yourself in.

Recently, I came across the Cynefin Framework in a post the RSA's report, From Design Thinking to Systems Change & subsequently, about chaordic leadership, which is about finding the balance between chaos & order:

- too much chaos & a team descends into chamos (destructive chaos and apathy)
- too much order & the team is over-controlled & their creativity stymied

The sweet spot lies somewhere between the two extremes. The Cynefin framework offers tools to navigate this territory.

Creativity during engagements

Nurturing a culture of creativity within consultant teams is not easy. Creating space for imagination that could lead to new seams of programming needs to balanced against KPIs, deliverables & deadlines. During an engagement, challenging situations & problems arise, sometimes on a daily basis. The Engagement Manager needs to find a course of action & make decisions in response to each situation. Unfortunately, there is no one size fits all approach to decision-making; the ideal solution in one context could be disastrous in another. Just because a solution worked well previously, doesn't mean it is the right one in the future. This is where Cynefin comes in. In the Harvard Business Review article, titled A Leader's Framework for Decision-Making 1, one of the authors, David J Snowden, coined

the phrase Cynefin in 1999. It's a Welsh word (ku-nev-in) that:

> that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that influences us in ways we can never understand

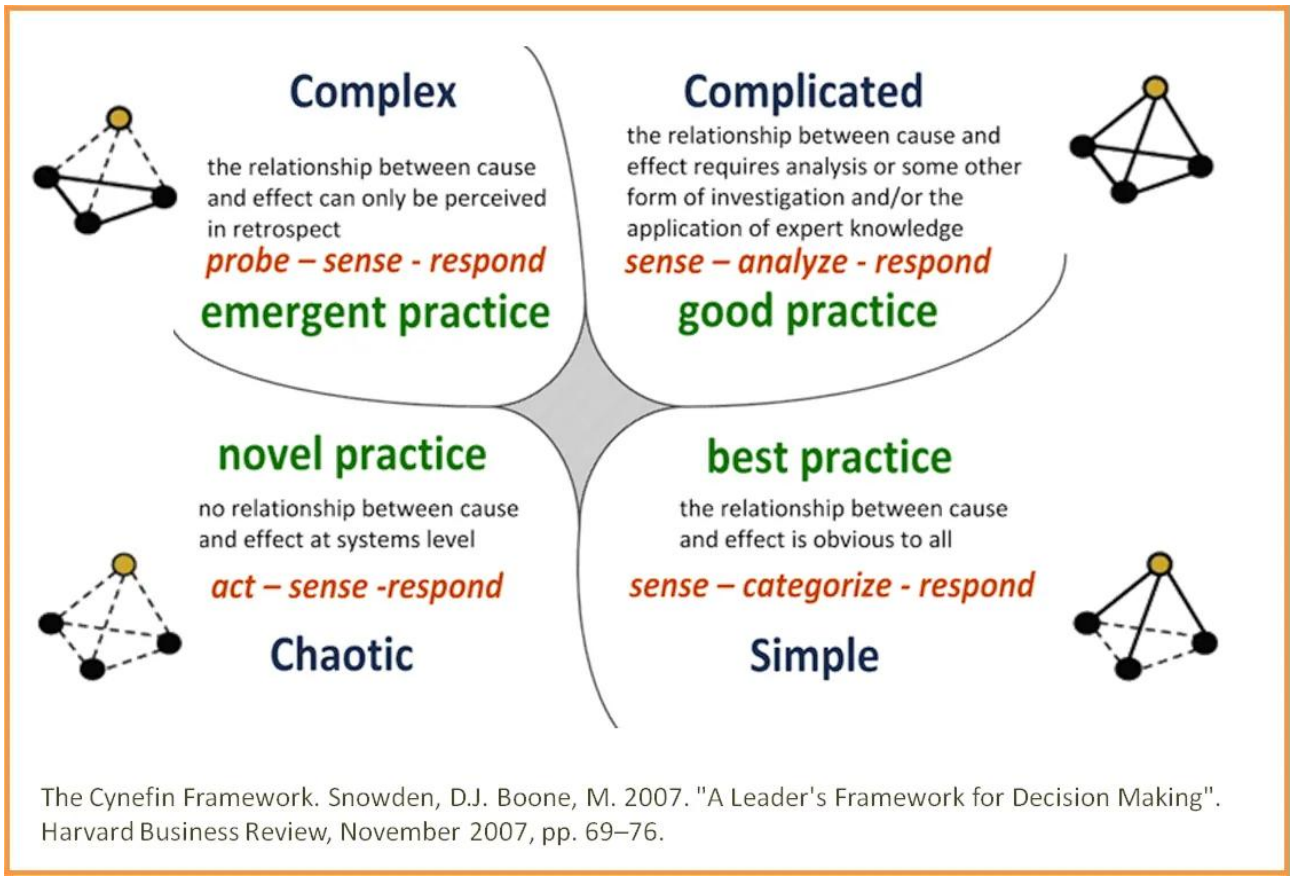
Snowden and co-author, Mary J Boone, provide the following summary:

> Using the Cynefin framework can help executives sense which context they are in so that they can not only make better decisions but also avoid the problems that arise when their preferred management style causes them to make mistakes

Non-linear business environment

Rapid changes in business environment makes it difficult to predict future. The future is no longer linear; you cannot foresee future steps. To explain this non-linear change, experts have come up with Chaos Theory and Complexity Theory. The Chaos Theory explores effects of small occurrences in dramatically affecting the outcomes of seemingly unrelated events. Complexity Theory is based on assumption that whole is greater than sum of its parts. Any system has large number of elements that are interacting with each other ex. various departments of organisation. These interactions can produce impact which is sometimes disproportionately bigger than sum of individual efforts.

The Cynefin framework helps leaders determine the prevailing operative context so that they can make appropriate choices. Each domain requires different actions. Simple and complicated contexts assume an ordered universe, where cause-and-effect relationships are perceptible, and right answers can be determined based on facts. Complex and chaotic contexts are unordered – there is no immediately apparent relationship between cause and effect. The emerging patterns often determine the way forward. The ordered world is the world of fact-management; the un-ordered world represents pattern-based management.



Cynefin Framework Visualization

In both chaos theory and complexity theory your past experience may not be of any use i.e. hindsight does not lead to foresight.

> In the complex environment of the current business world, leaders often will be called upon to act against their instincts. They will need to know when to share power and when to wield it alone, when to look to the wisdom of the group and when to take their own counsel.

The Cynefin model has 5 domains and your problem lies in one of the domains. The domain tells you what decision to take. The first four domains are:

Simple

In this domain, the relationship between cause and effect is obvious to all. In the simple (later renamed obvious) domain, your options are clear; everyone involved understand the relationship between cause & effect. For example, call center executives can resort to clear

& well defined processes to handle problems faced by their call center personnel. You can come up with best practices to handle such situations. Hence, it is also called domain of best practices. There is unanimous agreement about the best course of action, and the response tends to be a process. If something does go wrong, it rarely has to be escalated; the relevant staff member can adequately handle the issue. The risk here is that habitual processes lead to entrained thinking and better alternatives go unnoticed. Snowden and Boone also note that problems can arise when an issue is mis-classified as simple. For example, when "leaders… constantly ask for condensed information". In this instance, management complacency creates blind spots and these can be serious enough to tip the organisation into chaos if left unchecked

Complicated

In this domain, 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. In the complicated domain, the problem may have several solutions. Due to complication you may not be able to decide which solution to apply. In other words, there is clear relationship between cause and effect but solution is not visible to everyone. So, you need expert to solve your problems. Since there is dependence on experts it is called domain of experts. These issues require deep analyses because multiple factors will be involved. Furthermore, the problem may have multiple potential solutions. In this situation, think about working with audiences with specific needs, or developing cross-disciplinary projects. Furthermore, the recommended course of action is to call on experts who can offer informed insights. Entrained thinking may pose a problem when dealing with complicated problems. When the experts heavily invest in a particular approach or way of working, this may constrain the problem-solving process. The solution to this is to balance expert opinion alongside other, possibly dissenting voices. The other risk is analysis paralysis, where thinking reaches a gridlock, conversations go in circles, and little action is being taken

Complex

In this domain, one can perceive the relationship between cause & effect only in retrospect, but not in advance. The approach is to Probe – Sense – Respond. In case of the complex domain, it is very difficult to identify one correct solution or find cause and effect relationship. Today, many organisations face challenges that fall in this category. In such

situations, instead of coming with plan of action, it is better to be patient, look for patterns and wait for a solution to emerge. Correspondingly, the leader, instead of giving solutions, should gather diverse group of people and encourage them discuss possibilities and come up with innovative solution. This is also called domain of emergence. Pattern-recognition & experimentation are required to find solutions because there is no clear relationship between cause & effect. These won't be pre-packaged solutions, but rather brand new thinking. As the authors explain:

> When the right answer is elusive, and you must base your decision on incomplete data, your situation is probably complex rather than complicated... In a complicated context, at least one right answer exists. In a complex context, however, right answers can't be ferreted out

This would apply to untested approaches to museum learning programming, when leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. One of the best ways to find novel solutions is to draw on the collective experience and creativity of the team – no single brain is going to hold the answer. When leaders lose their nerve & choose to play it safe, retreating to tried-and-tested formulas that are already known to work well, they run a high risk in dealing with the situation.

Chaotic

In this domain, there is no relationship between cause and effect at systems level. The approach is to Act – Sense – Respond and we can discover novel practice. In case of chaotic solution, there is no relationship between cause and effect, so first step is to establish order. Crisis & emergency situations fall in this domain. Hence, leaders should to act decisively. Correspondingly, this domain is called the domain of rapid response as it requires quick action & decisiveness. This is the realm of the pear-shaped. Events happen suddenly and are hugely disruptive, and immediate action is required to stabilize the situation. The unexpected loss or mismanagement of funding would be an consequence. The more extreme possibilities could include natural disasters or terrorist attacks. These situations are rare. Direct, top-down management at the first instance is the best posture in dealing with such scenarios. However, once the crisis has passed, an ongoing authoritarian approach isn't helpful, and there is a risk of managers becoming legends in their own minds. There is a bit of good news though:

> the chaotic domain is nearly always the best place for leaders to impel innovation... One excellent technique is to manage chaos and innovation in parallel: the minute you encounter a crisis, appoint a reliable manager or crisis management team to resolve the issue. At the same time, pick out a separate team and focus its members on the opportunities for doing things differently. If you wait until the crisis is over, the chance will be gone

Disorder

The fifth domain is Disorder, which is the state of not knowing what type of causality exists, in which state people will revert to their own comfort zone in making a decision. Here, you are not clear on which of the above four domains you fall in. So, your primary goal here is to gather more information and move to any one of the four domains and take appropriate action.

Case in point

The Cynefin framework considers the boundary between simple and chaotic catastrophic: complacency leads to failure.

> During the Palatine murders of 1993, Deputy Chief Gasior faced four contexts at once. He had to take immediate action via the media to stem the tide of initial panic by keeping the community informed [chaotic]; help keep the department running routinely and according to established procedure [simple]; call in experts [complicated]; and he had to continue to calm the community in the days and weeks following the crime [complex].

I highly recommend the whole HBR article & Snowden's original article 2. Both articles include tips for leading team workshops that assess the issues and identify relevant contexts. The trick seems to be figuring out what you're dealing with – it can be as detrimental to over-simplify a situation as it is to over-complicate it.

Summary

Practice using the Cynefin framework the next time you have an important decision to make at work. Aim to identify the domain you're in correctly, and use the appropriate decision-making approach to process information and move forward.