Agreement and Certainty

Idea In Short

When the same solution keeps failing, check whether the team has matched its approach to the kind of challenge it faces. Agreement and Certainty helps participants map issues by how much they agree about the situation and how predictable the results are. The conversation distinguishes simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic challenges, then looks for mismatches between a problem and the response being used. Invite people close to the work, not only leaders. Use the map to decide where standard procedure, expert analysis, experimentation, or immediate stabilization may fit. Treat the categories as prompts for inquiry, not labels that make a difficult issue easy.

A team may respond to every problem with another procedure, even when the cause is unclear and the outcome of an intervention cannot be predicted. A different team may call every issue complex and overlook situations where a proven method would work. Agreement and Certainty helps groups pause before selecting a solution. Participants map challenges according to how much they agree about what is happening and how certain or predictable the results are. They then examine whether their current response fits the challenge. The practice reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Never Start Without Clear Purpose(s)” by encouraging teams to understand the problem before acting.

Use agreement and certainty as lenses

The matrix uses two dimensions: agreement about the nature of the challenge and certainty or predictability about its cause-and-effect relationships. A group may understand a situation and agree on what is happening, with a known response available. Another issue may have many interacting factors and uncertain outcomes. The matrix prompts participants to distinguish these conditions rather than assume that every problem can be handled with the same tool.

The four categories are simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic. A simple challenge has

clear relationships and a predictable solution, much like following a well-tested recipe. A complicated challenge may require expertise or analysis, but the relationship between action and result can be understood. A complex challenge has interdependent elements and outcomes that emerge through interaction; the group may need to experiment and learn. In a chaotic situation, immediate stabilization may be necessary before a team can make sense of causes or agree on a longer response.

These categories are not universal labels. Participants may disagree about where a challenge belongs because they see different parts of it or rely on different information. The facilitator should ask what each placement reveals. The point is not to win an argument about classification. It is to notice the assumptions shaping the response and determine what the group should do next.

Map real challenges

Participants first list challenges they are facing individually, then compare them in groups of four to six. The group creates a shared list of issues and introduces the matrix with examples. It then selects one challenge, discusses its degree of agreement and certainty, and places it on the map. Once the first example is clear, it maps the remaining challenges. Starting with a concrete case helps participants understand the framework more accurately than an abstract lecture.

For each challenge, ask: What do we agree is happening? How predictable are the results of our current approach? What evidence supports our view? Where might different roles see the issue differently? A challenge can contain elements from more than one category. A customer complaint might have a simple technical fix and a complex relationship cause. If needed, separate the issue into parts rather than forcing it into one box.

Identify mismatches

The group reviews its map and asks whether its current response matches the challenge. A standard operating procedure can work well when cause and effect are clear and the relevant conditions are stable. Expert analysis may help with a difficult but knowable technical question. A complex challenge often benefits from small experiments that produce feedback. A chaotic situation may require immediate action to reduce harm or restore basic stability before the group can analyze it.

A mismatch can take several forms. A team might impose a fixed procedure on a problem that requires experimentation, or conduct an open-ended workshop when an expert can resolve a known technical issue. It may also try to analyze a crisis in detail while conditions continue to worsen. The matrix helps a group see where its preferred method may be creating delay or false confidence.

The framework does not prescribe a single response for every category. Teams should select an approach based on the details of the issue, evidence available, and the consequences of error. A complex problem may include parts that can be handled with standard procedures. A chaotic event may stabilize quickly and become a complicated investigation. The group should revisit the map as understanding and conditions evolve.

Bring operational knowledge into the room

The official design invites everyone involved in the team or unit, not only leaders. This matters because people doing the work often see constraints and effects that do not appear in a management summary. Small groups allow participants to compare perspectives before a whole-group discussion. The facilitator should make room for questions and disagreement, and should avoid using the matrix to dismiss a person's concern as "just complex" or "only simple."

The practice takes around 50 minutes and uses a visible matrix, sticky notes, and small-group work. Online, a shared whiteboard can support the mapping. The host can change the language in the categories to suit the context while retaining the two dimensions. If participants are unfamiliar with systems frameworks, use practical examples rather than presenting theory. The goal is to improve the team's next decision, not test whether people can memorize labels.

Research on complexity-informed management encourages leaders to match decision approaches to the conditions they face. The Cynefin framework also distinguishes contexts requiring different modes of sense-making, and Harvard Business Review has discussed the limits of applying standard management solutions to complex environments. 1, 2, 3

Decide how to learn next

Close by selecting a challenge that deserves attention and agreeing on the next approach.

The team may use a standard procedure, consult an expert, run a limited experiment, or stabilize an urgent situation. Name the evidence that will show whether the response is working and when the group will review it. If a challenge's category is uncertain, that uncertainty itself may justify a small test or further inquiry.

Agreement and Certainty is useful when teams face a portfolio of different problems and need to avoid applying one solution reflexively. Its value lies in the quality of the conversation it makes possible: what do we know, where do we disagree, how predictable is the outcome, and what action fits? The matrix helps people slow down long enough to choose an approach with a better chance of matching the work.

- 1A leader's framework for decision making
- 2Managing complexity and uncertainty
- 3Complexity theory and management practice

Summary

Agreement and Certainty helps teams question whether their response fits the conditions of the problem. Participants map challenges against agreement and predictability, compare views, and identify mismatches that may waste effort or create risk. The framework is useful when a group is tempted to apply a familiar method to every issue. Keep the categories provisional, revisit them as evidence changes, and include the people who experience the challenge directly. A useful output is a decision about the next approach: follow a known procedure, seek expertise, experiment and learn, or stabilize conditions before further analysis. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.