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Leading in Uncertainty: Using the Cynefin Framework to Excel as a Leader

This job aid provides easy access to the Cynefin framework and to explanatory material and resources that will enhance your understanding of the tool. It also offers a series of questions to guide a reflection on your natural leadership approach.

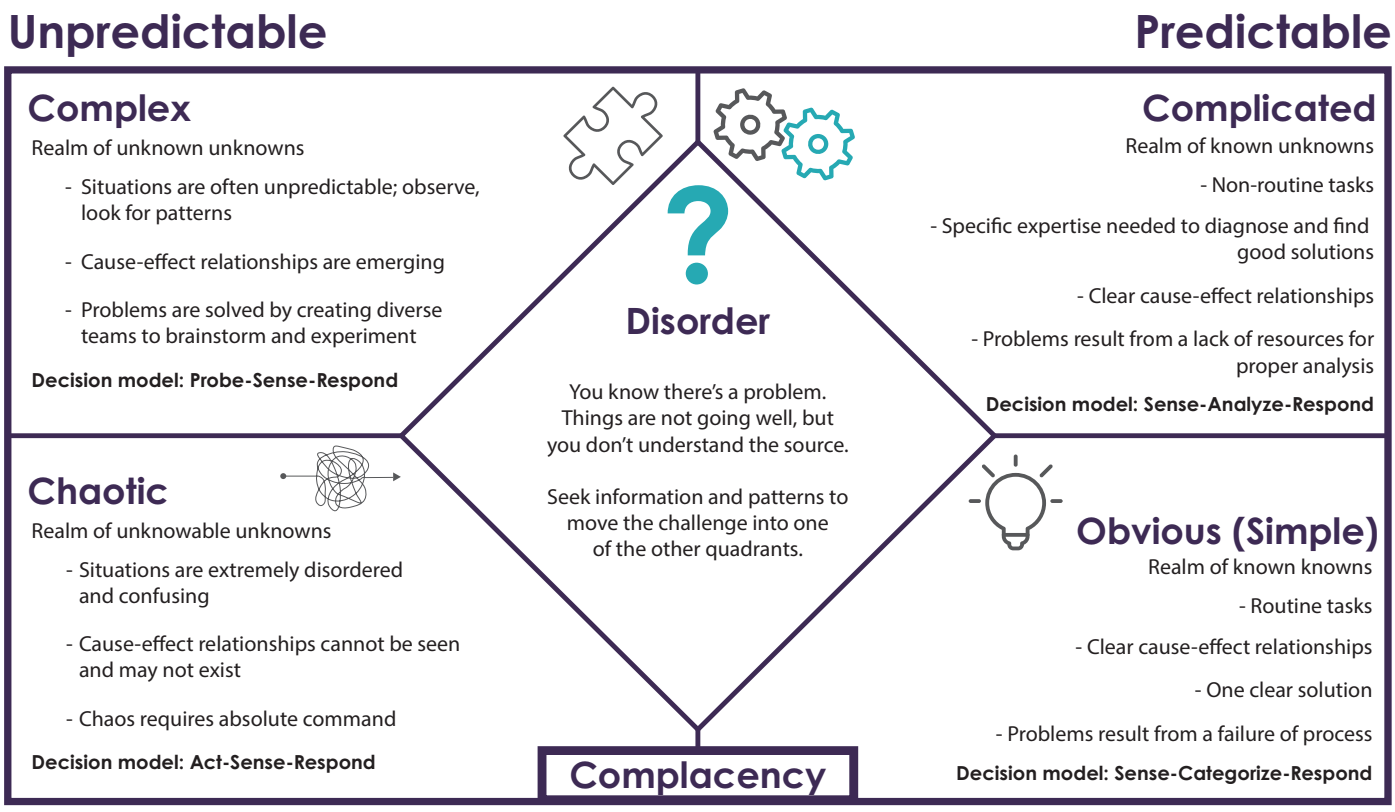
The Cynefin* framework is an approach to leading in uncertainty that helps you to quickly identify the sort of challenge you are facing, understand what is required, and make decisions that best suit the situation.

This highly effective tool equips you to:

- make sense of even the most chaotic situations
- recognize when your default leadership style is not optimal
- identify which leadership style best serves the situation

By understanding what different situations demand of you, you will shine as a leader in turmoil and uncertainty.

Cynefin Framework



Understanding the quadrants

Obvious (Simple)

In the Obvious (Simple) quadrant, it's easy to apply best practices. Activities are generally routine, and the results of particular actions are both predictable and repeatable.

Making decisions: The decision-making process for this quadrant is to **sense** what is taking place, **categorize** it and then **respond** accordingly.

Illustration: The uncomplicated processes of traditional sales, call-centre operations and basic finance fit well into the Obvious (Simple) quadrant. The problem is clear, the solution is evident and fact-based. Most problems can be dealt with using a formulaic if-then process map.

Caution: It's easy to think that the way things have been done is the way they should be done. However, best practices developed from past situations may need to be adjusted. To prevent a sudden shift from order to chaos, ask the people who do the work for their input on improvements and reflect on the potential impacts of changes in the environment to procedures.

Complicated

In the Complicated quadrant, the results of particular actions are clear to those with the subject-matter expertise to properly analyze the situation. There may be a number of acceptable if-then scenarios, but the right expertise is required to find them.

Making decisions: The decision-making process for this quadrant is to **sense** what is taking place and **analyze** the situation by applying an analytical model or recruiting expertise. Based on your findings you can then **respond**. Expertise may also be required to implement the solution.

Illustration: If you have clear questions without the answers, you are in the Complicated quadrant. You clearly see what you don't know, so you hire the consultant, facilitator or plumber to assess the situation and deliver the solutions that fit your context.

Caution: Because this realm involves subject-matter expertise, it can be easy to dismiss the perspectives of non-experts. Sometimes the most innovative suggestions come from those who approach the situation from another angle. Engage the diversity on your teams.

Complex

In the Complex quadrant, systems change constantly. To respond to the changes, individuals require looser parameters and guidelines. This is fertile ground for Agile design and prototyping where small failures may lead to reasonable solutions and reveal next steps.

Making decisions: The decision-making process for this quadrant is to **probe** by experimenting on a small scale, **sense** what arises, and then **respond** to the new situation as best you can with what you have or whomever you can recruit.

Illustration: In complex situations, there are no clear solutions. Like a scientist, you formulate a hypothesis based on what you know and you test it. You can't predict what your next move will be. You need to discover it.

A good example of complexity is the return to the workplace during COVID-19. Each situation is different and evolving in real time. Even with guidance, effective implementation requires a multi-disciplinary approach and a graduated return to work sites to minimize failure and risk.

Caution: Cause-and-effect relationships emerge only through action, so looking for definitive solutions on which to take action is futile. You don't know what you don't know. The only way to move forward or create order is through experimentation. In advance of experimentation, develop amplification strategies for successful experiments and dampening strategies to minimize the impacts of failure.

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Chaotic

In the Chaotic quadrant, situations require risk analysis and clear directives to establish order and ultimately transform the situation from chaotic to complex, where it can be handled more effectively. When you successfully transform the situation, remember to shift your leadership style to suit the quadrant.

Making decisions: The decision-making process for this quadrant is to **act** immediately to stabilize the situation. Novel practices are often required. **Sense** the outcomes of the actions and **respond** accordingly.

Illustration: Any situation classified as a crisis is considered chaotic. Looking at situations like the Lac-Mégantic derailment or the onset of COVID-19, it's easy to see that the most effective leadership strategy is to take control of the situation. You have a problem, you don't know the cause and new challenges arise at every turn (sometimes as a result of actions taken). An effective leader gathers information quickly, directs efforts where they are needed most and is always ready to pivot as the situation evolves.

Caution: Once crises have been managed, they could arise again. Work to identify emerging patterns to prevent this. The advantage of intense challenges is that opportunities emerge, so don't forget to look for them.

Disorder

Identifying when you are in the realm of disorder can be very difficult. If you can't clearly associate your situation with one of the four quadrants, you are likely in disorder. In this situation, the only thing you can do is gather more information until you can classify your situation within the framework.

Strategy: Examine the disorder to identify the problems within it. Your challenge may be in applying a different leadership approach for each element.

Caution: The greater the uncertainty and stress, the more likely you are to apply your default preference for action.

Reflection and exploration for exceptional leaders

Take a moment to reflect on a challenging situation that you could have dealt with more effectively.

Detail the aspects and characteristics of the situation that made it challenging for you.
What decision-making approach did you use?

Based on the challenges you faced, which quadrant best characterizes the situation?
(Obvious, Complex, Complicated, Chaotic, Disorder)
What key elements of the quadrant do you recognize?

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What did you do that worked, and what didn't work very well?

Based on the quadrant you identified, what decision-making approach could you further develop?

In what current situations could you find opportunities to practise your leadership approach?

Sources

A Leader's Framework for Decision Making (7-minute read)

The Cynefin Framework: Using the Most Appropriate Problem-Solving Process (5-minute read)

What is the Cynefin Framework? (5-minute read)

The Cynefin Framework (8-minute video)

* The Cynefin framework (pronounced kuh-NEV-in) was developed as a decision-making tool by Dave Snowden in 1999.