



Cynefin Summary

Cynefin is a framework that helps leaders make better decisions by adapting their approach to changing circumstances and draws on research into systems theory, complexity theory, network theory and learning theories. David J. Snowden and Mary Boone, published the framework in the November 2007 issue of the Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making>

The Cynefin framework gives five "domains" defined by cause-and-effect relationships. Cynefin, is a Welsh word that translates as "place" or "habitat." The domains offer a "sense of place" from which to analyse behaviour and make decisions

Obvious Contexts – "The Domain of Best Practice"

The *simple/obvious/clear* domain represents the "known knowns". The situation is stable, and the relationship between cause and effect is clear: if you do X, expect Y. The advice in such a situation is to "sense–categorize–respond": establish the facts ("sense"), categorize, then respond by following the rule or applying best practice. Here, decision-making lies squarely in the realm of reason; find the proper rule and apply it.

Complicated Contexts – "The Domain of Experts"

The *complicated* domain consists of the "known unknowns". Here, there is a clear relationship between cause and effect, **but it may not be visible to everyone**, because the problem is, well, complicated. "Sense – Analyse – Respond." assess the situation, analyse what is known (often with the help of experts or experienced practitioners) and decide on the best response, using good practice.

Complex Contexts – "The Domain of Emergence"

The *complex* domain represents the "unknown unknowns". Cause and effect can only be deduced in retrospect, and there are no right answers. Rather than developing a comprehensive plan of action at the start, it's often best to be patient, test or pilot approaches and watch for a solution to emerge. Cynefin calls this process "probe–sense–respond".

It can be a good idea to gather a diverse group of people to come up with innovative, creative solutions to complex problems, debate the possibilities and test the best out, accepting 'failure' as part of the learning process.

*Complicated and complex situations are similar in some ways, and it can be challenging to tell which of them you're experiencing. However, **if you need to make a decision based on incomplete data**, for example, you're likely to be in a complex situation.*

Chaotic Contexts – "The Domain of Rapid Response"

In the *chaotic* domain, cause and effect are unclear.^[e] Events in this domain are too confusing to wait for a knowledge-based response, The decision-making approach here is to "Act – Sense – Respond." You need to act decisively to address the most pressing issues, sense where there is stability and where there isn't, and then respond to move the situation from chaos to complexity.

Disorder

Here, it isn't clear which of the other four domains is dominant. in this situation, gather more information so that you can move into a known domain and then take the appropriate action.