# CYNEFIN

## A FRAMEWORK FOR DECISION MAKING

## „CYNEFIN"



**COMPLEX**
**probe** » sense » respond
*Exaptive practice*

**COMPLICATED**
sense » **analyze** » respond
*Good practice*

CONFUSED

**CHAOTIC**
**act** » sense » respond
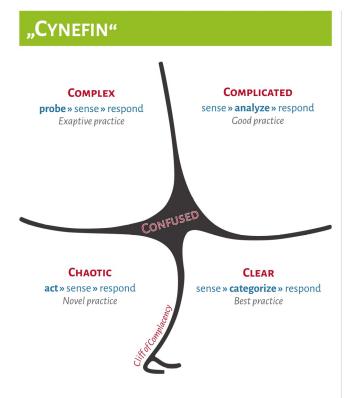*Novel practice*

**CLEAR**
sense » **categorize** » respond
*Best practice*

Cliff of Complacency

„Cynefin" is a multi-faceted Welsh word. Many aspects of it, but not all, are covered by a translation as „habitat".

Cynefin suggests 5 *domains* where decision making takes place, each featuring a *different* strategy for making decisions in optimal ways. Like in a real-world habitat, domains have border zones. They're not „quadrants" of a „matrix", but rather a territory that we roam, and live in.

Most situations require decisions to be made in multiple domains, over time. Also, emerging skills and knowledge may turn what once was complex, or even chaotic, into „only" complicated, or even clear.

## THE 5 DOMAINS OF CYNEFIN

### 1. CLEAR (FORMERLY „OBVIOUS" / „SIMPLE"): THE DOMAIN OF BEST PRACTICE

Example: *Order processing and fulfillment*.

Cause-and-effect relationships are clear, the desired results are known. Solutions are easily discernible, mostly undisputed, and they are working every time. There is a single *Best Practice* that is to be followed. The recommended strategy is:

1. Sense – establish the facts.
2. **Categorize** – find the category the situation fits into.
3. Respond – follow the Best Practice that has been established for that category.

### 2. COMPLICATED: THE DOMAIN OF EXPERTS

Example: *Fixing a broken car*.

Desired results are known, the system under scrutiny can be analyzed (even be disassembled and reassembled, mentally or physically), without changing it. *Experts* of the field can analyze the situation and devise various solutions that conform to *Good Practice* in that field. The recommended strategy is:

1. Sense – establish the facts.
2. **Analyze** – look at the parts or components of the whole and their interactions. Use your expertise to devise a path to get the desired results.
3. Respond – implement a solution, following the Good Practice established in your field of expertise.

### 3. COMPLEX:
### THE DOMAIN OF EXAPTATION

Example: *Coaching a team*.

What worked yesterday may not work anymore, today. Cause and effect are only (at best) correlated in retrospect, many factors come into play, and attempts to analyze a situation already change it. Despite a sense of direction, what constitutes a desired result only becomes apparent over time. *Exaptive Practice* emerges, creatively „repurposing" what is available. The recommended strategy:

1. **Probe** – figure out what you can amplify or dampen in a safe-to-fail fashion, provided there are realistic reasons to assume that your probes will have positive impact.
2. Sense – after probing, establish the facts, and look at what your indicators for success and for failure are saying *now*.
3. Respond – adjust your course, prepare the next probes, and review your indicators of success and of failure.

### 4. CHAOTIC:
### THE DOMAIN OF RAPID RESPONSE

Example: *Responding to a terrorist attack*.

Imminent destruction of values, or loss of opportunities, creates urgency. Things are happening in unforeseeable ways, and there is neither time for consultations nor for probing. Decisive action is needed to get out of the domain of chaos as fast as possible. That action is never safe-to-fail, but may lead to *Novel Practice* that can help to prevent future crisis, or increase the capacity to respond quickly and appropriately. The recommended strategy is:

1. **Act** – decisively take action, to „staunch the bleeding".
2. Sense – establish the facts, and determine where stability has set it, and where it hasn't yet.
3. Respond – try to move the situation from a chaotic one to a *complex* one, as fast as possible.

### 5. CONFUSED (FORMERLY „DISORDER"):
### THE DOMAIN OF CONFUSION

It is not clear which of the other domains is appropriate. The domain of confusion is entered on various occasions.

Examples:

- Multiple stakeholders cannot agree on what the current domain *actually* is, and decision making becomes inconsistent and erratic.
- After a superficial, and wrong assessment of a situation.
- Decision makers have their preferred domains and try to shoehorn the (any!) situation into them.
- Stakeholders are „authentically" transitioning from one domain to another, e.g. experts for the sake of innovation; or experienced people who realized that formerly „best" practices turned out to be harmful or dangerous.

### THE CLIFF OF COMPLACENCY

The *Cliff of Complacency* separates the Clear domain from the Chaotic one. Unreasonably sticking with a „best practice", as if the situation was still clear, or just because „that's how we always did it", and despite signs of impending doom, may lead straight to a descent into chaos.

## SOURCES & CREDITS

- The original article „A Leader's Framework for Decision Making" (2007), by *Dave Snowden* and *Mary E. Boone*: https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making
- The blog posts at Cognitive Edge, especially those of Dave Snowden, that are evolving the Cynefin framework over time: https://www.cognitive-edge.com/blog/