

Cynefin is a Welsh word often translated to mean “habitat” or “place.” Used here, and in materials developed by Welsh scholar Dave Snowden, it helps us to see an important distinction between environments that are simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic. This perspective also helps us see the difference in leadership practice needed in each respective environment.

As you might imagine, there are not absolute distinctions between these categories. For purposes of further exploring these distinctions, let’s use an example of working with the homeless, or as activist and author Andrew Heben names it, the “unhoused.”

Simple

Simple environments tend to call for best practice. Importing what others have done. A formula. An algorithm. All of these address what can be seen as cause and effect relations. In our example of working with the homeless, a simple environment could be supporting shelters to make sure that homeless people don’t freeze. There is a simple relationship. More shelters means more beds for the homeless, which means fewer people that die from exposure.

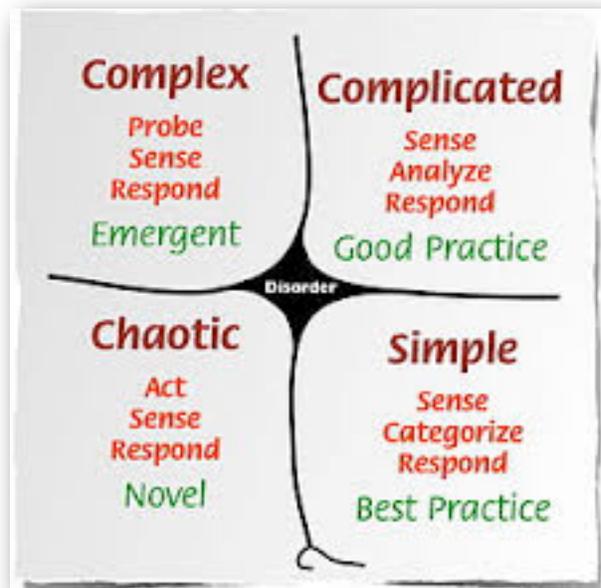
Complicated

Complicated environments are like the simple, yet there are more variables in play. Instead of there being one solution, there are now a few different approaches to choose from. It takes more thinking to figure out how the variables work together, but it is still possible to create formulaic solutions. Think of our homeless example again. Whereas a shelter reduces the number of people that freeze, shelter, a hot meal, and a toothbrush help even more. There isn’t necessarily a complete best practice to copy, yet there is something that comes close to this.

Most of our thinking these days leads us to solutions as seen from a simple or complicated approach.

Complex

This is where it starts to get very interesting. Complex challenges are not solvable in the same way that simple and complicated challenges are, no matter how much we attempt to do so. Formulas that work perfectly in simple environments are only one of several viable approaches in a complex environment. Complexity requires listening together. It requires getting more stakeholders into the room. Asking questions with one another and a willingness to experiment with each other. It relies on emergent practice, that which arises from people engaging together, thus debunking the myth that there is a “one right strategy” that can be replicated, as if it were a pill that would take care of everything.



Some confusion in these dynamics is not uncommon in ministry. Passion for a given cause can often lead to substantial exuberance for a given solution. People care and want to get on with solutions that they have

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seen work. But herein lays the needed shift in perspective. Complexity requires a solution that people can stand behind. It may not be what others have done, but it is what a particular community has chosen. As Margaret Wheatley says in her book, *Turning to One Another*, "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about." And further, sometimes our "caring about," in its complexity, invites multiple solutions to happen at the same time (or experiments or approaches). It is more tinkering forward for the long haul with the welcome of many approaches,

some of which will not last. It is less choosing just one way.

In our homeless scenario, ending homelessness is not accomplished by just doing more of what we do in complicated and simple environments. It is a bit of a different question, isn't it. It's not just more shelters (and more budget, and more building, and more toothbrushes). It is that, perhaps, but it is not only that. It might be some sanctioned tent city living areas. It might be shared community agreements. It might be a series of dialogues for the housed and the unhoused to meet to share stories and needs, that challenge stereotypes, that require deeper listening together. It might be patience in nibbling away at the understanding in a current paradigm that no longer applies.

Chaotic

This is the environment that is often most difficult to explain, even though most of us relate to a level of chaos. This environment refers to some of the more extreme situations that some of us have been in. A hurricane or flood that displaces thousands of people from their homes and communities. An earthquake or other natural disaster that removes access to electricity and water. There our times when nothing is simple. When everything feels overwhelming. When we are at the edge of being able to feel any hope or relief. In chaotic environments, it is the random acts of doing that matter. Without permission. Without planning. Just action from real time instinct. Taking a meal to someone because you can and because you know they are hungry. Holding a child that you don't know because he or she is afraid. Cobbling together clothing to be used for the family whose house was destroyed by fire. Just listening, human to human, because someone needs to tell their story.

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Notice however, two things about chaotic environments. First, the intellectual premise (it's a bit harder to get at the emotional level) that within all chaos, there is order that emerges. In human systems, this is a deep trust and reliance on the human spirit. To offer what is needed. Though the individual offerings might be rather random, the integrating pattern that holds them all, has order. The order of "caring" that shows up as random acts of compassion. There is hope, much hope from this perspective. Yet it requires a kind of patience that might test the best of us. Second, the chaotic environment is closely related to the simple. They are not the same, yet they are oddly related. In chaos, it is offerings that help. Simple offerings. In a simple environment, these tend to show up more as plans. In chaos, they are spontaneous offerings. Less thinking. More feeling it and doing it.