

## Cynefin:

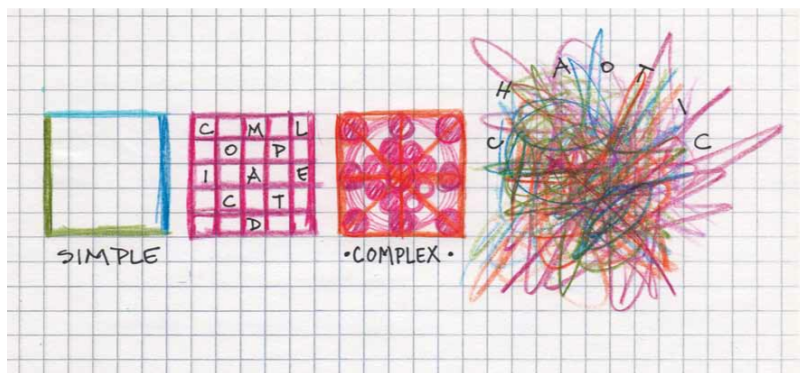
### A Framework for Understanding Complexity and its Neighbors

Tenneson Woolf with Kathleen Masters: Adapted from UMC Participatory Leadership Journal

Most leaders these days are asking questions about complexity. How to work with it, not against it? How to work within a network? What supports sustainability? How to become more fluid? What structures help and what structures don't? What is leadership in a complex system? This isn't surprising. Many people are trying to understand their situations from a systems perspective. Most of us are trying to undo, or at least look at with fresh eyes, approaches that have traditionally sought understanding primarily through dividing the whole into the most minuscule of parts. Most of us have followed a bright-shining star of reductionism that we now realize was a temporary brilliant comet, now fizzled in its attraction.

The Cynefin framework offers some help to understanding. Cynefin is a Welsh word which means 'habitat' or 'place.' Used here, and in materials developed by Welsh scholar Dave Snowden, Cynefin refers to four types of environments: simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic.

In addition to describing these environments, below we offer an example of the differences in leadership approaches when applied to policies and programs related to homelessness.



#### Simple

Simple environments call for best practices. Practices that follow a formula or an algorithm. Doing what others have done. Using simple cause and effect thinking.

In our example of working with people who are homeless, a simple approach would be to support the existence of shelters such that people don't sleep in the cold. More shelters mean more beds. More beds means less people ill or freezing.

#### Complicated

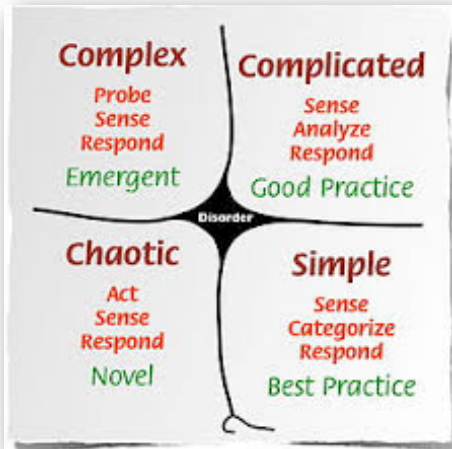
In complicated environments there are more variables at play than in simple environments. Instead of one approach, there are many. It takes more thinking to figure out how the variables work together, but in complicated environments, is still possible to create formulaic solutions. Rather than looking for "best practice," you are now looking for a choice between "good practices."

In the homelessness example, whereas in the simple approach, a shelter might reduce freezing-related deaths, now in a complicated environment, a shelter, hot meal, and toothbrush help even more.

## Complex

This is where the distinction between environments gets very interesting and very helpful. Here we learn to challenge ourselves not to think of all environments as being the same. Complex challenges are not solvable in the same way that simple and complicated challenges are, no matter how much we may want them to be. Formulas that worked perfectly in simple environments are no longer enough.

Complexity requires listening together. It requires including more stakeholders in the room. Inviting people to question one another and be willing to experiment. Complexity relies on an emergent practice, which arises from people engaging together. Not imposing a best practice. Not defaulting to a good practice.



Working with complexity requires a willingness to debunk the myth that there is only one right strategy to be replicated. One pill doesn't magically take care of everything.

It is common that passion for a given cause can often lead to substantial exuberance for a favored solution. People want to get to the solutions that they have seen work, and then move on to the next. But herein lays the needed shift in perspective.

Complexity requires a solution that *many* people can stand behind. It may not be what others have done, but it is what your particular community has chosen. Margaret Wheatley says in her book, *Turning to One Another*, "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about." Caring, in its complexity, invites multiple expressions of caring to happen at the

same time. Complexity is more of a tinkering forward for the long haul, staying in learning, and welcoming many approaches.

In our homeless scenario, ending homelessness is not accomplished by defaulting to doing more of what we have always done in complicated or simple scenarios. This paradigm shift asks different questions, doesn't it? The solution may not be found in building more shelters – and more budget, hot meals, and toothbrushes -- but they are not exclusively found there. Emergent solutions might also be in the city sanctioning housing or tent-living areas. It might be shared community agreements. It might be a series of dialogues for the housed and the unhoused to meet and share stories and needs, while challenging stereotypes and listening deeply to one another. The solution might be found in patiently nibbling away at a current paradigm that no longer applies or address underlying issues of addiction, mental illness, trauma, or post traumatic stress disorder. The hunger for a solution becomes an invitation to see systemically together.

## Chaotic

This environment is often the most difficult to explain, even though most of us relate to a level of chaos. This environment refers to extreme situations. 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. 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 a family because you can and because you know they are hungry. Holding a child because he or she is afraid. Cobbling together clothing to be used for the family whose house was destroyed by fire. Listening, human to human, because someone needs to tell her or his story.

Chaotic environments are perhaps the ones that most challenge our thinking. One reason for this is that actions needed in chaotic environments are so closely related to actions in the simple. Not the same, yet oddly related. In chaos, it is in the offerings that help. In a simple environment, these offerings tend to show up as plans. In chaos, the offerings are spontaneous. Less thinking. More feeling and doing.

A second reason that chaotic environments are more challenging is the intellectual premise that within all chaos order exists. Even in the collapse of an economy exist the seeds of a new way of creating exchange. Even in a devastating forest fire exists the seeds of regeneration that can only be released through heat.

In human systems, this requires a deep trust and reliance on the human spirit to offer what is needed. Though the individual offers might appear random, the integrating pattern that holds it all altogether is easily recognizable as ordered. It's like taking an immediate leap from the ground level to the 30,000 foot level. At 30,000 feet, pattern is more likely noticeable.

### *Tip:*

*You can turn this into an easy and helpful experiential exercise that ends with sorting projects into the four environments.*

*Ask people to first organize in a simple way, for example, by height. Great. Most groups will arrange tallest to shortest. Some go outside the lines immediately into other categories of height (height of hair, heel on shoe, etc.) Don't worry about this. These are the people that will really get the complexity part of the exercise.*

*Then ask the group to organize in a complicated way, for example, by eye color, shoe size, and height. There might be a few murmurs. Give them enough time to come up with a solution. Most will find their way into a kind of formula by ranking the criteria. First eye color, then among those with the same eye color, the smallest shoe size, then among that, the shortest person. It's doable with some thinking.*

*Then ask the group to organize by experience. If the group hasn't already started pushing the boundaries, they will need to now. "What do you mean by experience?" "Age?" "Travel?" "At work?" "Raising family?" The point is that this request, a complex one, requires a conversation and a choice among many viable choices. Engagement is essential. Not just imposing a solution.*

*Lastly, you ask people to show you what chaos looks like. Aside from odd behaviors and sounds, people will actually feel challenged not to fall into pattern, for example, imitating others near them. We human beings are coded to look for and create patterns. There is order in chaos.*

*Ask people then to break into groups or teams for a conversation about their work. What are they already doing and which quadrant does it fit it? What is the next evolution of the work and which quadrant does it best fit it? Ask them to come with post-it notes representing that work and physically place them on the Cynefin framework. It is a great way to see systemically what is currently happening and what shifts might be made to create sensible actions.*