Using the Cynefin Framework to Map Your Challenges

***Disclaimer****: This document is not intended as legal advice. Your organizational goals, purpose, bylaws, and values should drive the creation of this document.*

Using a matrix to address challenges can be a way for a group of people to dive in together and discuss their perspectives on how they see the issues and topics playing out in their collective space. The gift is not just in the categorization but in the dialogue. Please note that part especially – it is not just you at your desk unpacking things into quadrants or categories, it is the group journey that is essential.

At the heart of the definition of complexity, [The Cynefin Framework](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework) created by David Snowden in 1999 is a Welsh word for habitat or the idea of finding place. There is great depth to this framework. This handout seeks to simply introduce the concept. If you have an interest in using this framework, we encourage you to call us or dig deeper on your own into a vast network of resources and tools on the topic.

In its simplest use, this framework is the opportunity to understand that not all challenges are the same and, therefore, not all decisions are the right match. In its simplest form, the framework asks us to categorize our challenges so that we can then match the right amount of time, money, resources, tools, people, and decisions to find a solution. A standard “a-ha” in the framework is to understand why many decisions that the nonprofit board and staff make do not return the expected results. Indeed, you may unknowingly be applying the same set of tools and resources to very different kinds of problems.

**Understanding the quadrants at a high level**

Cynefin offers five decision-making contexts or domains: simple (also known as clear or obvious), complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder (also known as confusion).

**Simple**

This domain represents the "known knowns." This means that there are rules in place or best or proven practices to manage the challenge. Generally, the situation is stable, and the relationship between cause and effect is linear and clear. For example, you do X, then you can expect Y as a result. The general process to get to a solution is to "sense–categorize–respond” so that your response follows the rule or applying best practice or proven practices to get to the desired solution**.** *An example is a group that wants to bake a delicious chocolate chip cookie. The solution to the challenge is a proven recipe.**This cause and effect is relatively quick and requires known resources to achieve.*

**Complicated**

This domain consists of the "known unknowns." The relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or expertise and generally lots of time. There is a range of right answers to these challenges, and they often require a process of defining the challenge, assessing the facts, analyzing the potential outcomes, and then applying a variety of solutions. Usually, this kind of challenge requires “outsiders” to join the team in order to add value and move a challenge toward a solution in a way that the current team has not been able to do on its own. *An example is a group that wants to build the equivalent of a rocket ship, but they do not have all the knowledge and expertise they need to do it. The solution is to invite proven experts to the team and to take the time needed to achieve the desired result. There is still cause and effect to meeting this challenge, but unlike the simple challenge, a lot more time and expertise is required to add to the existing structure. Note that this is often a common role for capacity builders or other consultants to enter an existing team environment.*

**Complex**

This domain represents the "unknown unknowns." Cause and effect can only be deduced in retrospect as it is not linear, and no single right answers are readily accessible. This process involves "probe–sense–respond" because complexity is often determined by the tools of “simple” and “complicated” that have been applied, and the challenge persists. In this way, one must “learn their way forward” to identify emergent practices not yet understood. EMCArts and their founder Richard Evans developed a pathway to both determine complexity and a process to undertake the challenge. Their design requires a series of steps that involve questioning current assumptions, defining a hypothesis for change, testing that hypothesis through small experimentation, landing on a prototype for further experimentation, and then finally scaling for a solution. A hallmark of this process is questioning assumptions, which is one of the ways one knows the difference between complexity and complication. Additionally, this process absolutely requires “outsiders” to the existing team who provide essential insights into assumptions through experimentation. *An example of complexity is parenting twins or adapting to new ecosystems or shifting organizational culture.* Unlike the other challenges that can be tackled more than one at a time, this quadrant requires dedicated focus and resources over many years to see results.

**Chaotic**

This domain is thought of as both a crisis that must be solved immediately before other decisions can be made like a leaking roof or a fire to be put out where the cause and effect must be immediate. Others believe that this quadrant is more unpredictable and random, or accidental chaos. In this use, we would encourage you to consider this section as areas that need immediate attention as they pose a distraction to achieving larger goals or require immediate attention with quick and decisive decisions so that other challenges can be seen and addressed.

**Disorder**

This domain is also referred to as “confusion” because it is uncertain which of the other domains applies. Snowden and his co-author Mary Boone note in a Harvard Business Review article in 2007 that “the way out of this realm is to break down the situation into constituent parts and assign each to one of the other four realms. Leaders can then make decisions and intervene in contextually appropriate ways."

**How to use the matrix**

For this high-level introduction, the goal of this exercise is to work with your team to identify the challenges facing your organization. Solving them requires many more steps.

1. Work with your team to make a list of challenges.
2. Place them in the appropriate box.
   * Resist the temptation to see complicated challenges as complex.
   * Complex challenges all have the following criteria:
     + The challenge does not have a standard or established solution.
     + Your team has not yet developed a response to this challenge, or the current responses are not proving effective.
     + If your team successfully tackles it, it is likely to have a significant impact on your ability to fulfill your mission.
3. Once the challenges are categorized, determine which ones the organization is ready to embark upon solving. Is there a natural sequence to addressing these challenges? If so, which one comes first? Remember that different challenges require very different responses and resources.

Note that the goal of the Cynefin Framework is not necessarily to “solve” the challenge in the “complex” domain but to see it as a means to identify challenges and work on them until they can become “simple” or knowable. As knowledge increases, Snowden and Boone note that “there is a ‘clockwise drift' from chaotic through complex and complicated to clear. There can be counter-clockwise movement as knowledge is forgotten, or as new generations question the rules; and a counter-clockwise push from chaotic to clear can occur when a lack of order causes rules to be imposed suddenly.”

**The Cynefin Framework**

***Designed by EMCArt based on David Snowden’s work and provided to The Foraker Group.***

**A diagram of a complex disorder

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**