



# IT'S A COMPLEX WORLD

COULD IT BE A THINKING PROBLEM?

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## Acknowledgements

The opportunity to spend 10 weeks on paid leave is one that should be grabbed with both hands. The mental load carried by a principal is significant. A principal is required to be the school's human resources manager, asset manager, health and safety manager, finance manager and marketing manager, in addition to being the resident teaching and learning expert. There is also the need to serve their staff, the parent community, the wider community, the school Board and the government of the day. A mental break from this should really be compulsory every 5 years. So, to the Ministry of Education and the NZ Government, thank you for this opportunity and the trusting way in which it was provided.

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## Introduction

*One should never bring a knife to a gunfight, nor a cookie cutter to a complex adaptive system<sup>1</sup>.*

VUCA (an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity)<sup>2</sup> is a term that was first used back in the late 1980s. It is a way of describing the nature of the world faced by both for-profit and non-profit organisations (Henderson, 2014). High levels of VUCA are not something humans naturally cope with. Our brains crave a degree of routine and certainty. They are hardwired to enjoy routine; to maximize reward and minimize risk<sup>3</sup>. Where we can't see a reward we will focus on the minimization of risk. Where we can't find this we will work hard to create such an environment. In a VUCA world this can be detrimental to solving complex problems, and is one of the pitfalls addressed by working with the Cynefin framework (see Figures I and II).

There is an apparent dichotomy between a brain that craves routine and certainty and a context that is inherently complex and uncertain. This tension is almost the essence of twenty-first century leadership. Is there a way to progress, while solving these complex problems and gaining a degree of comfort in this environment?

Knowing that there are complex problems that require different strategies and mindsets to solve is very apparent to most leaders. However, knowing and doing are too often quite separate things. It is easy to talk about the problems and challenges leaders face in their organisations. Knowing what to do and finding a way forward when things are not clear is often hard; as humans we want simplicity. If we can't see it, we often default to little or no action. Therefore the knowing and doing gap persists. (Argyris, 1993; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000)

This report outlines a potential way forward. Since discovering the Cynefin framework it has had a large impact on my leadership, mainly in terms of how I think about the challenges that are being faced in my organisation. This impact doesn't come from using a suite of new tools that make understanding and solving these problems easy; it is first and foremost an influence on mindset. How I think about a problem or challenge we are facing will determine the way forward. How we categorise a problem will often give us insight into the way forward. The following pages outline what the Cynefin framework is and provide some education-specific contexts for the various domains within the framework. They also give some insight into how I have used the Cynefin framework, and plan to use it in the future, in my own leadership and organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Jarche, <https://jarche.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: *Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity* - <https://en.wikipedia.org>

<sup>3</sup> Dr Judi Newman (2019) – Neurleadership Masterclass, National Future Schools Conference, Melbourne.

## Story

When people asked what I was looking at during my sabbatical period, I told them I was looking at the Cynefin framework and how it can be applied in the organizational setting, particularly in primary schools. In every case I lost their attention from the moment I mentioned the word Cynefin. It is a Welsh word, and though I know little about the Welsh language, I have picked up some clues from Dave Snowden and Steve McCrone (McCrone, 2019; Snowden<sup>4</sup>). It doesn't translate nicely into a single English word; its best translation is *'place where you belong'*. Another way of viewing the 'intent' or meaning of the word is seeing that your actions are based on your cultural background. This means that diversity is needed to attack complex problems. This refers to diversity in its broadest sense; diversity in thinking, mindset and perspective, not simply outward appearances. After explaining the Welsh origin of the word, how to pronounce it, and spelling it out, I find linking it to a very real problem in New Zealand schools provides a helpful context in which to describe the framework.

I believe that if I asked any primary educator "What is the biggest achievement challenge in primary schools?" writing would be the answer in almost 99% of cases. That would be further qualified to be boys' writing, and in almost all cases, Maori boys' writing. Well over 90% of Kahui Ako have writing as one of their achievement challenges.

In my experience this need or challenge also existed prior to Kahui being the vehicle for addressing achievement. In the days of national standards, accelerating literacy learning and LDPD (literacy development professional development), writing was almost always the chosen focus. This is not a new problem. The New Zealand system has spent a great deal of money trying to solve it, but it remains unsolved.

If considerable resources, expertise and time have been focused on addressing this issue, why does it continue to remain the challenge today it was over a decade ago? In the context of the Cynefin framework we have continued to have the mindset that this is an obvious problem or maybe at best a complicated problem. We have never thought of it as a complex problem and subsequently applied the appropriate suite of tools or mindset to solve it. The concepts of complicated versus complex problems are described in the next section, 'Cynefin defined'.

Our default mindset, which is that this is an obvious problem, means we have approached it, and still do, with simple cause-and-effect thinking. In practical terms we identify the under-achieving cohort by making an overall teacher judgement and identifying the elements of the writing where gaps occur. We determine the cause of the problem from the gaps identified. We then decide that the way to fill these gaps is to provide additional direct teaching, combined with professional development in the teaching of writing skills. This should solve the writing achievement problem. However, the evidence is to the contrary. If this approach worked, then over 90% of Kahui Ako wouldn't have writing as an achievement challenge.

The initial mindset is the issue here. Writing achievement is not an obvious problem, it's not even a complicated problem; it's a complex problem. If it's a complex problem then the Cynefin framework

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<sup>4</sup> Education Roundtable with Professor Dave Snowden held at the University of Otago Medical School, Wellington Campus, August 2018.

would suggest we approach it in a different way. Albert Einstein<sup>5</sup> is credited with telling us “*The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.*” Unfortunately, this is the approach we have been taking for over ten years with regard to writing achievement.

In the Cynefin mindset, if a problem is classified as a complex one, we don't know the pathway to a solution. Our work consists of probing the way forward in what Dave Snowden, the creator of the framework, calls a *safe to fail probe* or experiment<sup>6</sup>. In the 'Cynefin Defined' section I'll discuss the details of a safe to fail probe.

## Cynefin Defined

Cynefin (pronounced Ka na vin) is the work of Dave Snowden<sup>7</sup>. It doesn't translate into a single word; the phrase, 'place where you belong' is the best English translation. It is similar in concept to the Maori idea of Turangawaewae. In essence it has five domains; obvious, complicated, complex, chaotic and disordered. For the purposes of this report the focus will be on the first four. The nature of a given problem will determine which domain it resides in and therefore, based on the model, how you'll go about solving it.

Snowden makes a brilliant job of explaining the Cynefin framework in an introductory sense through a 10 minute YouTube video. If you're after a very simple introduction then this video is well worth your time<sup>8</sup>. However, if you are like me it will arouse your interest, and your curiosity to seek further understanding and clarity.

### *Obvious Domain*

In the simple or obvious domain things are highly structured, predictable and repeatable. In this domain a simple cause and effect process will work; a checklist will work. The nature of the problem is obvious to all concerned; a pattern that exists and the actions that needs to be taken to solve the problem are clear. Snowden would call this best practice.

Humans like things simple, we like the obvious; it plays to our brains' need for certainty and risk reduction. The danger, however, is that we perceive complicated and even complex problems (see the sections below) as simple when they are not. In other words, we attempt to apply a best practice approach even though there is no sign of the repeating pattern that indicates a best practice solution is appropriate. In essence, best practice does not yet exist for this kind of problem. Writing achievement in New Zealand fits into this category and is discussed earlier in the report. We treat it like an obvious problem, but years with little impact indicate it's not.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thesimpledollar.com/if-you-want-different-results-you-have-to-try-different-approaches/>

<sup>6</sup> For further reading or viewing on Safe to Fail probes visit these sources, <https://cognitive-edge.com/methods/safe-to-fail-probes/> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8\\_rzTiMhJg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8_rzTiMhJg)

<sup>7</sup> Cognitive Edge, <https://cognitive-edge.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Cognitive Edge, The Cynefin Framework, (2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8>

## *Complicated Domain*

The complicated domain requires the input of an expert with experience to find the pattern. There are cause and effect relationships and they need to be discovered. The critical difference between the complicated and obvious domains is the existence of multiple potential outcomes when dealing with complicated problems. Essentially there is a cause with multiple effects or there is a problem with multiple solutions. Snowden would say the best approach is to sense, analyse and then respond. It is important with complicated problems to listen to the experts and also to get conflicting expert advice. This will lead to a greater chance of getting to a solution that will be successful.

Leaders need to be mindful that experts are humans and are therefore subject to bias; in this case the desire to oversimplify a problem and see only one solution. This might be based on their experience and willingness to back solutions that have worked in the past. It is also critical that the leader includes the views of non-experts, who should not be excluded in the sense and analyse phases. Snowden would say the solution here is good practice. Good practice is the idea that there is a small selection of possible actions to solve a given problem. All ideas are reasonable solutions and are therefore the result of good practice. This is not to be confused with best practice, which is a single solution to a given problem and really located in the simple domain. Senge (1991), in his seminal work *The Fifth Discipline*, discusses the concept of a mental model, which is in effect the state an expert can fall into when providing advice and guidance about an identified problem. They can provide advice that is less customised to the context of the problem under discussion and more based on a solution that has worked in the past, without taking sufficient note of the nuances of the problem in front of them.

Regardless of the context, we all bring a mental model to any situation. Snowden amplifies this idea, recognising that experts in a given field are held in high esteem, but also suggesting that their input should be combined with other data from non-experts and experts with a different perspective.

Great examples of this in the compulsory education sector exist in the teaching of core curriculum areas, such as reading, writing and mathematics. There is a range of accepted strategies and teaching practices for these areas of learning. However the chosen solution or path is very much context-specific.

The teaching of reading is a classic New Zealand example. At the extremes are those experts who believe if all children were taught using a phonics-based approach then all children would learn to read, and at the other end, those who believe that if all children were immersed in a rich language environment then all children would learn to read. Then there are approaches that fall somewhere in between. The reality for most teachers at the chalk face is that all approaches are needed at some point to achieve progress with children's reading. For this reason, learning to read is a complicated undertaking, for both children and teachers.

## Complex Domain

Complex problems, by definition, have many elements that are unknown; Snowden would refer to these as unknown unknowns. Such problems are characterized by unpredictability and the need for creative and innovative approaches. Snowden suggests we need to probe, sense and then respond. Probing is executed via a series of 'safe to fail' experiments. In a sense we're trying to create an environment that allows the patterns to emerge, so that we understand better - sense - our current situation or context before we respond or act. Safe to fail experiments should be designed in such a way that if the outcome is positive it can be amplified, or if the outcome is negative the result can be minimised. Before embarking on a safe to fail probe, or ideally a series of safe to fail probes, some things need to be determined.

Those undertaking the probe need to know what the feedback mechanism will be. How will you know it is working, and how will you know it's not working? What is the process you are going to use to get this information? Each probe should have an agreed timeframe within which it will be carried out and then either amplified or dampened.

It is critical when working in the complex domain that leaders slow down and allow patterns to emerge from the work the teams are doing. Often there can be pressure to get results and discover the way forward, or even to somehow make the complex problem a simple problem with an appropriately simple solution. It is critical therefore, when working in the complex domain, that leaders demonstrate patience and allow sufficient time for reflection and pattern discovery.

## Chaotic Domain

The chaotic domain is as its name suggests. It involves high levels of tension or even panic, and no sense of the right direction in which to move. However, it is also 'temporary' in nature and can be a place for innovation if the chaos is contained. The way forward here, Snowden argues, is to act, sense and then respond. Leaders should be looking for what is working instead of seeking the right answers, as the leaders' job is to provide clear communication and take immediate action to re-establish a sense of order. In many respects the aim is to move out of the chaotic domain as quickly as possible and deal with complex issues.

Chaos, by its very nature, requires a command and control response from the leader. However, the leader must bear in mind that there is a time for this, and that time will come to an end

quickly. It's critical that the leader does not fall

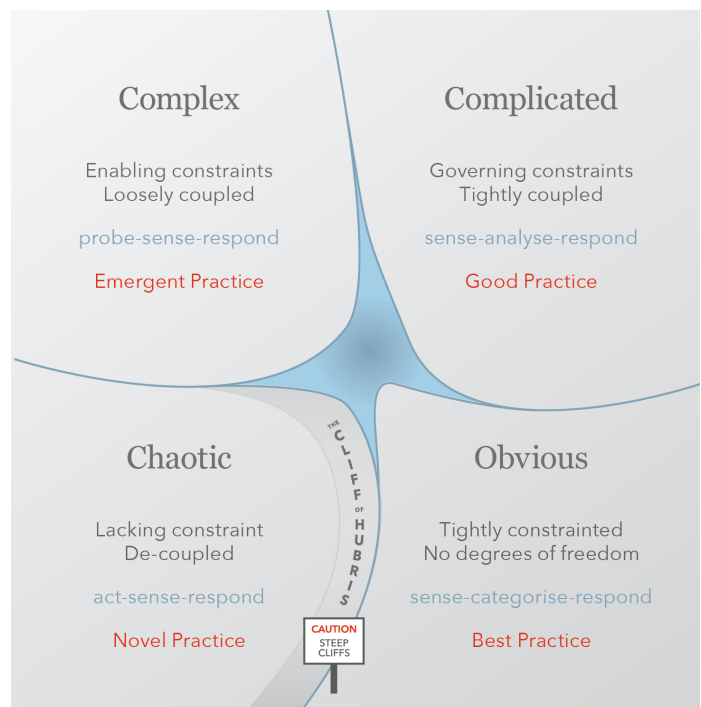


Figure 1 – Cynefin Framework



into the trap of operating on a command-and-control basis for any longer than is required to move the problem from chaotic to complex.

In New Zealand the recent example that almost all of us can relate to would be the terrorist attacks in Christchurch in March 2019. Following the police timeline of events there was a window of approximately 18 minutes during which no one, including the police who were charged with resolving the situation, knew what was happening. The extent of the threat was unknown, the loss of life and seriousness of injury was unknown, and the location of the threat was not certain. It was by definition Chaotic. Based on the police timeline<sup>9</sup>, however, it moved from Chaotic to Complex in approximately 18 minutes. This was due to the police taking control and exercising a command and control approach.

### *The Cliff*

Cynefin has boundaries between the various domains. All of these boundaries can be negotiated in a deliberate fashion, except for the boundary between the simple and chaotic domains. In some graphical representations of the model, this is drawn as a cliff as in Figure 1 above, while in others it is a small U-shaped line. Either way the principle is that the boundary between these two domains behaves quite differently than those between other domains.

Why is this? If you are operating in the Obvious domain, and start to believe that your past success is a strong predictor of future success, with no chance of failure, then you enter the complacent zone; the area near the cliff's edge. Not recognising this will mean you can fall over the edge into the chaotic domain. Recovery from this is possible but usually time-consuming and expensive.

Kodak, the American film and photography company, is a great example of this. For decades, Kodak had a proven track record in leading the industry. Kodak operated the business in the simple domain, and with each new product and strategy there was success. The company believed that past successes predicted an equally successful future. In reality, they became complacent. While not ignoring digital technology, they spent no time in the complex domain, working to find out whether this technology might benefit the company. The ultimate result was that complacency led to the company falling off the cliff into the chaotic domain as a consequence of operating too long in the simple domain. In Kodak's case, the company closed down.

### Party Story

Cynefin creator Dave Snowden tells a now famous story to illustrate the nature of systems theory. Using this very simple experience you'll be able to see how the various domains can play out. This story is based around how one might go about organizing a child's birthday party. Viewing the video of him telling this story and making the connections will be very helpful if you're at all interested in understanding systems theory better<sup>10,11</sup>. I have lost count the number of times I have watched this, and I

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<sup>9</sup> NZ Police Christchurch Mosque Shootings, Timeline of Events, <https://www.police.govt.nz/sites/default/files/publications/christchurch-shootings-timeline.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Snowden, Dave (2009) How to Organise a Children's Party, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Miw92eZaJg> (short version)

still keep getting insights into systems theory generally and the Cynefin model specifically. The following are examples of some of these insights.

Systems have what theorists call boundary constraints. In an ordered system these boundaries are rigid. Lessons from practice suggest that in systems that are not ordered, imposing such boundaries will almost always result in the boundary breaking. This is further proof that one needs to understand the system in which one is operating.

A chaotic/complex system will often create the conditions necessary for innovation. Dave Snowden uses the Apollo 13 movie to illustrate this point. When the crew and NASA engineers were faced with a complex problem – how to rid the air the astronauts were breathing of CO<sub>2</sub> – they had to design a solution that would work and save three lives. Snowden argues that this environment involving pressure (a highly constrained timeframe), a perspective shift (because the flight plan was no longer useful), and a scarcity of resources, meant they had to solve the problem with the resources they had available in the spacecraft. As the famous New Zealand scientist, Earnest Rutherford, is quoted as saying to his team “we don’t have the money so we’ll have to think.”

With complicated problems, the Cynefin model suggests using experts to help provide a way forward. Experts are great for complicated problems but not for complex problems - experts have had training, therefore patterns are established in their brains. This is not to suggest not using experts when examining complex problems, but at the very least Snowden would argue for the use of competing experts to create a possible perspective shift, where they’ll be forced to examine their advice more closely and deeply.

## Context Is King

Spending a reasonable length of time in schools will inform a leader that context is king. The environment in which you find yourself will determine your leadership actions. The context will determine where your energy should go. Do you put your energy into shoring up the financial footing of the school, or is it better spent increasing the engagement of the parent community? Would time and effort spent redesigning the curriculum be of most value? Does the performance of the staff need to be lifted, or does the quality of relationships between the leadership and Board need your attention? Should you put your energy into the operational systems? Would there be a great return on your effort by lifting the profile of the school in the community? Are there student safety issues that need your attention? As most school leaders know, there are no silver bullets and this underlines the complexity of leadership. There is no right answer about where I put my effort; it is wholly informed by the context in which I find myself.

This is where the power of the Cynefin framework can be seen. Snowden argues that the essence of solving complex problems involves gathering data from those in the midst of the problem to be solved. [insert ref here to party story]. The goal in solving complex problems is not to know the solution, (if you do, then by definition it is not a complex problem), but to determine where to probe in order to move towards a solution.

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<sup>11</sup> Snowden, Dave (2019) How to Organise a Children’s Party, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vBQ4\\_G8mrM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vBQ4_G8mrM) (long version)

Gilbert (2015) and Fullan (2011) have argued quite strongly that the best solutions to problems, complex or otherwise, will be devised by those on the ground, as opposed to using a top-down model. Gilbert [ref here], in her article for the Education Council, makes the point that solutions devised by those in the system – leaders, parents, teachers and children for example – will produce ways forward that are deeper and more connected to the real problem.

“System-wide change has to come from within the system, not from “top down” initiatives designed to produce specific kinds of change, thought to be knowable in advance. We need within-system initiatives designed to produce more – and deeper – interactions between the system’s elements – people (teachers, students, school leaders, parents, policymakers, researchers, and so on) and their physical and intellectual environment/s.” (Gilbert, 2015)

The essence of complex problems is they don’t fit into the best practice or good practice thinking or solution mode. There is not a model, strategy, or framework you can use that will get you to a solution. Gilbert (2015) puts this very well. Context is everything: strategies that “work” in one situation won’t perform similarly in another situation with different starting conditions and different interactions. Mandated, one-size-fits-all solutions will not “work” in complex situations.

When the system (i.e. the national system, regional system, local cluster of schools or local school) wants to make change and therefore initiates some data gathering, the ‘truth’ of this data is lost in how it is gathered and interpreted. In essence the ‘data’ is mediated, interpreted and conclusions are drawn by those who don’t own or experience it. It should be interpreted and acted upon by those whose data it is.

How many times have we in the compulsory education sector attempted to apply a best practice lens to a problem that is complex? How many times has our education system attempted to apply a ‘simple problem’ mindset to something that has its own context? Think national standards, teacher appraisal, school reviews, school payrolls, learning environment design, teacher performance, and school collaborations, to name just a few.

## School Challenges

It is often thought that the business of schooling is a simple undertaking. A child enters the formal education system on their fifth birthday and then through a structured and uniform process of exposing the child to knowledge, they will grow in their own knowledge and this will be proved in a series of increasingly more difficult assessments, tests and exams. After 13 years of this, they will emerge from the formal system ready to take on the world.

Talking to anyone who has daily or even weekly understanding of school life will tell you it’s not quite that simple. When we think it’s that simple, we forget that we are dealing with little humans who are learning a vast array of information, skills and social nuances, underpinned by the simple yet profound truth that no two humans are the same, or develop in the same way.

We have to translate this thinking about the formal learning of the individual child and multiply the experience. In a school sense, it’s not just a single child that is undergoing this learning experience. It is a large number of individuals whom we put together in the same place for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week

and call it school. On the face of it, how can schooling, even in its simplest form, be a simple undertaking? At best it's a complicated situation, and usually a complex one.

In reality when you delve into all the components of this thing we call school, it is an organisation that has many different challenges, which cover all the domains of the Cynefin framework. In the following paragraphs I discuss some of these challenges, particularly those faced by principals as they go about doing the work of organisational leadership.

### *Board of Trustees*

In New Zealand we elect, every three years, a Board of Trustees to govern the school to which they are elected. They are charged with governing in the interests of the children enrolled at the school, the staff employed at the school, the parents whose children attend the school, and the Government of the day, which funds and enacts the various pieces of legislation that the Board must comply with.

Each New Zealand school Board of Trustees therefore has, in broad terms, four distinct groups they are governing for; children, staff, parents and Government. It would be a rare, if not miraculous moment, when all four of these groups aligned about what they wanted for the school. Each Board thus faces an ongoing barrage of complex challenges. What follows is a scenario often faced by Boards.

The Board or a subcommittee of the Board meets to discuss the future of a child enrolled at the school following a suspension. Let's assume the facts of the incident that led to this meeting have been well established. In its deliberation the Board must consider the education of the child concerned, the safety of the other children on the roll, and the health and safety of the staff, along with the realistic nature of any conditions that are imposed, the voice of the parents, and the correct application of the relevant clauses of the Education Act. A complex problem therefore exists by its very nature.

### *School Culture*

'School culture' is a great catch-all term that can be used to describe many things in the life of a school. For the purposes of this discussion let's assume it describes "how we do things around here". This relates to how we, as an organisation focused on learning, act, think and go about our work. If we break this down even further we can look at the vision or mission of the organisation (Henderson, 2014).

Getting an organizational vision written, owned and rolled out is a critical and energy-consuming task. Of course it can be done in very short order if relatively few people are involved, or if it's simply a compliance undertaking; however, such an approach will have a negative effect on the long-term effectiveness of the organisation.

In the Cynefin framework, when a challenge is complex the outcome – in this case the vision statement – is not known. Neither is the exact pathway to that outcome. What we know at the start is that we need a vision statement for this organisation, and we want that to be owned by a wide circle of stakeholders. That is all that can be known with a high degree of certainty.

Some people think they have a known pathway for designing a vision, for getting to the desired outcome. While this is a starting point, I am sure that none of the actual pathways different organisations take to get to their final vision exactly follow a predetermined pathway.

The reality of designing a completely owned and well 'lived' vision comes from a process that is relentless about engaging the various parties at the right level. In treating a visioning exercise as a complex problem, you can begin with the current reality and ask yourself, "How can we be a little more like what we want to be"; how can we move ourselves in the general direction we want to head in? You can then design a small process that will test whether it takes you in the right direction; a 'safe to fail' probe.

### *Team Performance*

Schools are only effective when the people (adults) in their number one team and their day to day team perform. The 'number one team' is an idea referred to by Patrick Lencioni. The notion is that within any organisation we have a team that we work closely alongside on a day-to-day basis. We also have the number one team, the whole organisational team. This statement would be broadly accepted by many people, but while easy to say, it's more difficult to make it real. (Lencioni, 2002)

A team is a collection of adults, assembled either voluntarily or not. They represent a collection of life experiences, beliefs, perspectives, professional experience and personalities. How could this be anything but complex? Indeed if it was a simple undertaking we would see high-performing teams right across society.

There are a number of frameworks and models in existence that help in building highly effective teams. At Shotover we have designed our own, which goes a long way to helping us on this journey. It doesn't make the undertaking any less complex, but it does make some of the team actions merely complicated and therefore easier to execute.

### *Strategy*

Almost by definition any strategy will, in the early stages, be a complex undertaking. If it isn't complex then broadly speaking it would be classified as business as usual. Cynefin and strategy consultant Steve McCrone defines strategy as a mode of operating, not the result of a process. This is a 180 degree turn on how we generally think about and practice strategy in the education sector.

We know our direction of travel and we know usually what 'there' should look like. We also think we know what the actual steps are that will get us there. We think we know the path, but how often do we actually follow that path?

No single person or organisation can possibly know how the future is going to pan out; they can't know what the typical strategic period of three to five years will bring. However, most organisations will plan as if they do. This is based on the premise that the system in which they are working is ordered and predictable. Usually this is not connected to reality. Fried and Heinemeier (2010) summed this up best in their book *ReWork*: "Working without a plan may seem scary, but blindly following a plan that has no relationship with reality is even scarier."

Once you begin approaching strategy with a Cynefin mindset it involves putting yourself deep into the learning pit. I am not proposing in this report to discuss strategy and Cynefin deeply. I suggest you access the work of New Zealander Steve McCrone<sup>12</sup> at Cornwell Strategic or a series of videos on YouTube of Dave Snowden<sup>13</sup> talking about this topic.

*Safe to Fail in a school context*

Schools often fall prey to the Christmas Tree syndrome. That is grabbing hold of the next shiny thing that is being offered to add to their suite of decorations for their school. Essentially adding more and more strategies or approaches to how they go about their work and without applying a filter that could determine the efficacy of a given approach. Therefore over time overloading the Christmas Tree with shiny decorations.

Since coming across this idea of safe to fail probes or experiments I have been thinking about the application in a school environment. In the new year one such approach will be with some cloud based maths software. In previous times this would have been budgeted for after some teaching staff reviewed the software. Then it would have been rolled out across the school. The result a not insignificant amount of money being spent with no plan to know if it was a great return on the investment of time and money. One safe to fail probe we will be running in the near future will involve such software. However we will have the following boundaries or constraints around it. It will be time bound, 5 weeks, involve a limited budget, have a predetermined way of measuring impact, have a predetermined way of amplifying or dampening the probe.

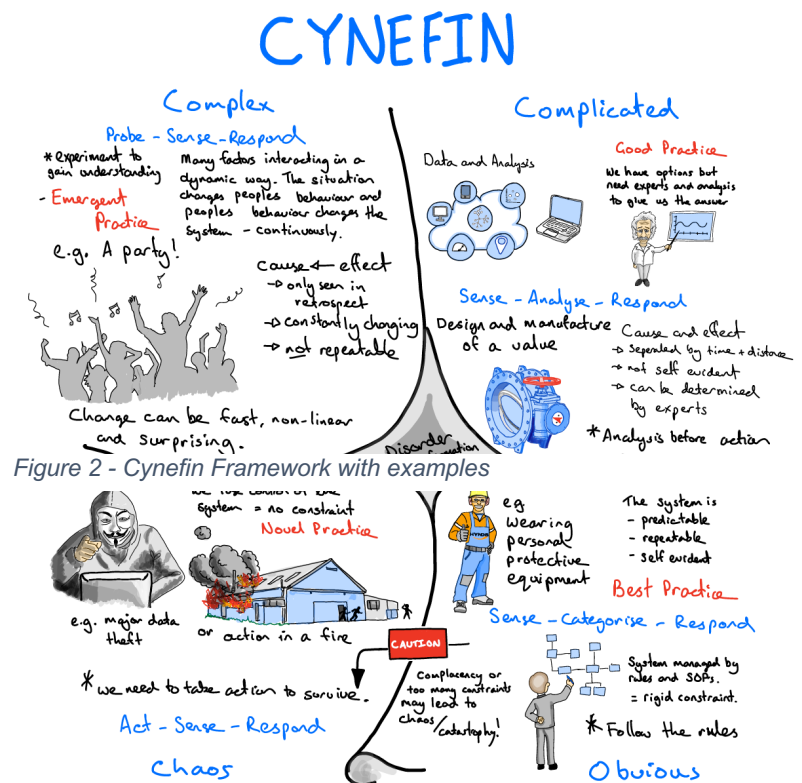


Figure 2 - Cynefin Framework with examples

All organizations need to in some way think strategically. They need to think about what the future may bring and what they are going to do to create the future they want. Some organizations do this in a very deliberate fashion and others do it in a very haphazard fashion.

Traditionally, strategic planning has one significant flaw: it assumes the person or persons writing the plan can predict the future. If that is the case and you have such a person or persons in your organization then go ahead and write your plan. However, if you, like me, don't have such people, then maybe there needs to be a change of mindset about this whole strategic thing.

<sup>12</sup> Steve McCrone, Cornwell Strategic, <https://cornwallstrategic.com>

<sup>13</sup> Dave Snowden, Understanding strategy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFi9mlIp2NY>

Thinking of strategy in a Cynefin mindset does change the process. By definition, most strategic directions are, in the first instance, complex problems, yet we traditionally attempt to solve them using an obvious or complicated approach. Deep down I think we often know this is simply time-consuming guessing, but still we continue to devote time and energy to planned strategic initiatives, hoping they will give us the desired result.

Thinking of your strategic direction as a complex problem means a change of approach straight away. No longer do we have the path predetermined. Instead we're much better off setting up some safe to fail experiments that will hopefully nudge us in our desired direction of travel.

Safe to fail experiments are exactly that; the amount of energy and resources expended is 'safe'. There are some rules around implementing this;

- Determine some success criteria; in other words ask yourself "What would I see if this worked?"
- Ensure you have a feedback mechanism.
- Ensure you have a plan to amplify it should it begin to work.

Designing these rules should be done giving consideration to your organization's values or agreed principles. In other words you're not going to run a safe to fail experiment that is contrary to what your organization values and how it has agreed to operate (McCrone, 2019).

When you find an approach that is working and moving you closer to your desired outcome you will have a way of amplifying this. The goal is to then find a way to make it at the very least a complicated process, ideally even an obvious process. Doing this moves it to a business as usual approach.

Changing your mindset around strategic planning and thinking, and using a Cynefin approach, means the strategic direction becomes more grounded in reality, and a mode of operation rather than the result of a process. (McCrone, 2019)

Applying Cynefin in a school context and with a strategic mindset has proved useful and insightful. At a basic level it causes you to stop and think with generating ideas to solve the strategic challenges of an organisation. This means you are less likely to think about each challenge as an obvious problem and therefore having a single 'best practice' solution or approach. When designing various activities to give life to our strategic goals we went about this in a slightly different way than we historically have.

## Conclusion

I often wonder whether many of the problems, challenges and issues we face in our personal and professional lives and the organisations we work with are the result of fundamentally poor thinking. Knowledge of systems and the Cynefin model would seem to bear this out. Looking at our various challenges through the 'obvious' lens is almost always going to lead to varying degrees of frustration.

If our mindset was different – if we approached our work with a complexity mindset – then our thinking about our challenges would be far more nuanced and grounded than when we try to think of all things as obvious.

The recent measles outbreak is a classic dilemma. On one level the solution is obvious. The science is clear; there is a weight of evidence that tells us if we vaccinate, we will eliminate the disease. However, making that happen is not so obvious. If it was, the outbreak would be under control. There are many variables that make it at best complicated, and in some cases complex. Factors include movement of people, the highly and rapidly contagious nature of the disease, the socioeconomic status of the affected population, access to vaccines, and variable knowledge of the symptoms and of course the highly significant range in belief about the efficacy of being vaccinated. If lack of vaccination was an 'obvious' problem, as soon as an outbreak was detected it would be resolved.

As this issue is discussed, there is a sense that the experts in the Ministry of Health understand this and the general public don't. This makes it even more important that we talk about the variable nature of the challenges we face.

I have listed a number of resources in the appendix that while not directly referenced in this report, have been useful as I began to understand this work. Please make use of them in developing your own understanding and applying it to your own work.



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