


<b>Field of application</b>	<p>Cynefin is used for decision-making in different system realities.</p>
<b>Resume / Brief description</b>	<p>Cynefin is considered a sense-making framework, which means that its value is not so much in logical arguments or empirical verifications as in its effect on the sensemaking and decision-making capabilities of those who use it. The Cynefin framework is used to understand and take action in different types of systems confronting decision makers. It is often used for strategic decisions and the reflections on how to intervene in complex systems or complex contexts. It differentiates leadership roles between areas where we can concretely find out what to do (the ordered reality) and where we do not know what to do (disordered reality). Accordingly, the framework defines 4 domains and leadership requirements to intervene in a system:</p>  <p>The diagram illustrates the Cynefin framework with four domains arranged around a central point labeled 'Confused'. Each domain has a specific process and constraints:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Complex</b>: probe-sense-respond, Enabling constraints, Exaptive Practice</li> <li><b>Complicated</b>: sense-analyse-respond, Governing constraints, Good Practice</li> <li><b>Chaotic</b>: act-sense-respond, no effective constraint, Novel Practice</li> <li><b>Clear</b>: sense-categorise-respond, Fixed constraints, Best Practice</li> </ul> <p><b>Clear context</b> (the domain of best practice): We see the situation and it is very clear what has to be done. Interventions can be used that are based on best practice and existing knowledge. This is also called the realm of "known knowns". The job of the leader is to make sense (possibly with colleagues, employees, and partners), categorise and decide what has to be done, and assure that proper processes for the intervention are in place. Then, tasks can be delegated, and intensive communication is less necessary. The motto here is: "Let us just implement it now!"</p> <p><b>Complicated contexts</b> (the domain of experts): More expertise and knowledge is needed in a certain situation to make a decision or to promote an intervention. The problem can be understood and solved with more deeper insights ("known unknowns"). The leader's role with his or her teams or partners is to deepen the analysis, to identify experts with different solutions and to decide for a solution (or intervention). Planning steps and monitoring have to be assured. The motto is: "Let's get the experts do their work according to plan, do follow up and assure that the issue is solved!"</p> <p><b>Complex contexts</b> (the domain of emergence): In most human and relationship-based systems we are dealing with complex contexts, in which cause and effect are impossible to trace back ("unknown unknowns"). A linear leadership style and expertise do not help in such a situation. Multiple causes and effects influence each other and it is important to provide space for experimentation and exploration. Small interventions or safe to fail experiments can help to identify patterns of responses. The patterns identified then provide ideas for further careful steps of action. The role of leadership here is to follow the logic of probe-sense-respond with other stakeholders. An environment has to be created that allows experiments and patterns to emerge. Identifying patterns and reflecting on experiment results require strong interaction and communication skills. The motto here is: "Let us experiment, open up discussions with dissent and variety, identify patterns and jointly design a variety of experiments to better judge the playing field and opportunities for further interventions!"</p> <p><b>Chaotic contexts</b> (the domain of rapid response): In these contexts</p>

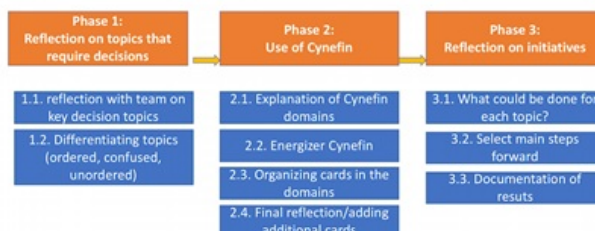
	<p><b>Chaotic contexts</b> (the domain of rapid response). In these contexts, the situation is that unstable that cause and effect as well as patterns are totally out of any predictability and shifting constantly ("unknowable knowns"). Dave Snowden, the author of Cynefin, mentions here. <i>"In the chaotic domain, a leader's immediate job is not to discover patterns but to stanch the bleeding. A leader must first act to establish order, then sense where stability is present and from where it is absent, and then respond by working to transform the situation from chaos to complexity.</i> Here hierarchical leadership styles come into play, which are not helpful in the other domains but are necessary here. The motto is: "Let's stop the crisis, reestablish order, decide top-down!" (Snowden &amp; Boone, 2007, p.65f.)</p> <p><b>The cliff</b> between the simple and the chaotic domain: The Cynefin model draws a cliff between the two domains (see visualisation). While there are soft or so-called liminal areas between the domains, this liminal domain does not exist between the simple and the chaotic domain. Here you find a cliff. This means that if you mistakenly treated a system or intervention as simple or clear, but it would actually require complex or complicated patterns of action, the system can fall over the cliff and spontaneously lead to chaotic reactions. This cliff emphasises the importance and risk at the same time to not come up with simplistic answers to more complex problems.</p> <p>Considering these different system realities, decision-makers have to be able to make use of different management and leadership strategies to overcome one-size-fits-all behaviour models in complex realities or, according to Snowden &amp; Boone (2007), engage in "contextual decision-making".</p>
<b>Target group</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decision-makers in the university or in an organisation that wants to identify more diverse and more successful styles of interventions.</li> <li>2. Students that require leadership skills in complex living systems.</li> <li>3. Professionals that want to coach and consult public or private organisations to improve their strategic decision-making processes.</li> </ol>
<b>Objectives</b>	<p>The objective is to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify different ways to intervene in a living system</li> <li>• Learn about decision-making and leadership roles</li> <li>• Learn about different realities in the system that require different ways to understand and intervene in the system</li> <li>• Teach students and professionals about the dynamics of complex living systems and sensitise them to understand better how to approach their complexity without running into too simplistic solution models</li> </ul>
<b>Requirements</b>	<p><b>Material</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A pin board (virtual or real) with the Cynefin framework</li> <li>• Cards and markers</li> </ul> <p><b>Time</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2-3 hours</li> </ul>



## Implementation - Overview

The activity is realised in 3 phases.

### Cynefin



## 1. Reflection on topics that require decisions

### 1.1. Reflection with a team on key decision topics

The starting point of a Cynefin workshop is the question of the topic or theme that the workshop should focus on. It can be rather open or more focused. It can focus on key decision topics that have to be made (e.g. decisions to make in regard to the organisation) or are related to one theme or issue of concern (e.g. How to develop a new product? How to increase income? How to tackle the support of businesses in our region?). The focus of the workshop has to be defined in advance.

Everybody in the team writes their key inputs on relevant aspects that have to be considered (topics, answers, ideas for solutions, suggested steps forward) on each card. Everybody can write several cards so that a critical number of cards are written.

### 1.2. Differentiating and structuring the cards along the ordered, unordered and confused domain

The facilitator draws the horizontal line of the Cynefin framework with its three areas on the pin board: on the right the “ordered side” and on the left the unordered side, and in the middle the domain “confused”. He or she also has designed the same line on a flipchart for the table.

The facilitator puts the flipchart table with the line on the table and gives the following instruction: “Please order your cards now on the flipchart line where you think solutions can either be identified relatively easily or identified with some more expertise (under the ordered area), where you think we need more experimentation and exchange or clear decisions from the top (on the right side under unordered) or where I am not sure yet what is needed (under confused).”

## 2. Application of Cynefin

### 2.1. Explanation of the Cynefin framework

The facilitator adds the horizontal line into the framework and explains all four domains (clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, and the cliff) on a pin board.

### 2.2. Cynefin energiser for better understanding (optional)

There is the option to make use of an energiser to better grasp the idea of the Cynefin logic. Once the Cynefin has been explained the energiser can be integrated:

- The facilitator asks the group of participants to stand up and then gives the first instruction: “Sort yourselves according to your heights!” When they have done, the facilitator asks them in which domain this might fall (clear/obvious one).
- The facilitator then gives the second instruction: “Sort yourselves according to your ages, birth months and birthdays!” When they have done, the facilitator asks them in which domain this might fall (complicated one).
- The facilitator asks then the group to play the first round of the **Systems Game**: “Stand in a circle, choose two persons (secretly) in the circle, as soon as I am saying “Go!” you position yourselves in between these two persons. Keep your position even if the others are moving. Afterwards, the facilitator asks them in which domain this might fall (complex one).



African Centre for Career Enhancement & Skills Support (Access)

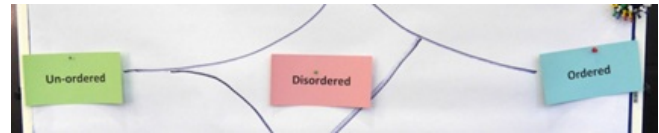
[Terms of Use](#)

<p><b>Implementation - Guidelines</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This reflection will help to better understand the logic of the Cynefin in a playful way.</li> </ul> <p><b>2.3. Organising cards along the domains</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants are then asked to organise their cards according to the domains (on the pin board). In many areas they have to write more differentiated cards because some answers for solving the issue might be rather simple, others rather complex. Unclear cards can be left in the confused area.</li> <li>• Organising the cards along four questions can be helpful in that respect:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We know what to do but have to assign it and get it done (clear domain),</li> <li>2. If we analyse it well and find the right expertise, we can solve it (complicated domain),</li> <li>3. We have not fully grasped what is going on here and it seems not as easy to solve it straightforward (complex domain),</li> <li>4. We have to decide quickly not to run into real problems (chaotic domain).</li> </ol> </li> </ul> <p><b>2.4. Final reflection on cards and adding new cards if necessary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A reflection in the team about the main findings and insights follows: Questions like "What do you observe? What have you identified?" help to encourage the joint reflection.</li> <li>• The cards will be presented and their position discussed. Unclear cards will be redefined if necessary, duplications will be taken out.</li> </ul> <p><b>3. Reflection on initiatives</b></p> <p><b>3.1. What can be done for each topic/card?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each card requires certain decision-making and the definition of interventions or actions. According to the domain, the intervention or decision requires different approaches.</li> <li>• The team reflects together:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ In the simple domain: "What are concrete steps forward?"</li> <li>◦ In the complicated domain: "What additional analysis or information and expertise is required?"</li> <li>◦ In the complex domain: "What safe-to-fail experiments can we promote to better understand what is going on?"</li> <li>◦ In the chaotic domain: "What kind of concrete decision is needed now to stabilise the situation?"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• It might be that some of the cards require reconsideration. They might move e.g. from the complex to the complicated dimension.</li> </ul> <p><b>3.2. Select main steps forward</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the differentiation of decision-making requirements and intensive reflection, the team selects the main field of action they want to take: "With which initiatives and actions to start?" is the key question here.</li> <li>• Having selected some starting initiatives it will be relevant to define concrete next steps, fix responsibilities and clarify which stakeholders need be involved in the further process.</li> </ul> <p><b>3.3. Documentation of results</b></p> <p>A Cynefin workshop is work in progress. It might be that only a few issues can be taken up. It might also be that some initiatives that were interpreted as e.g. complicated finally turn out to be complex. The pin board provides the opportunity to reorganise the cards. In that way, the first Cynefin workshop results can become a continuous process tool which helps to make sense about the process. In that respect, visualising it on a pin board or digital mural board helps to come back to it.</p>
	<p><b>Cynefin workshop in a development project</b></p> <p><b>Description of the context</b></p> <p>The development project is focusing on the economic development of a region in an East-European country. The consultancy company</p>



region in an East European country. The consultancy company Mesopartner did a workshop with the team to reflect about different kinds of initiatives that can be promoted to improve the competitiveness and sustainable development of especially the regions and certain value chains like agri-processing and IT in the region.

**Starting with a reflection on topics and issues and structuring them along the three horizontal domains (see phase 1)**



**Explanation of the Cynefin framework (see phase 2.1.)**



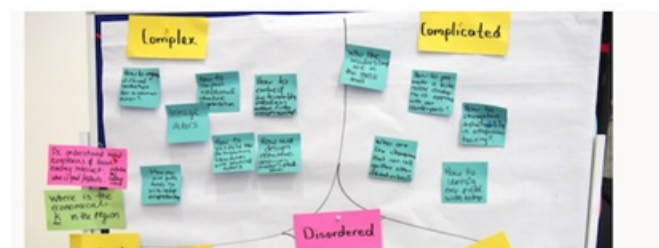
Before introducing the Cynefin framework the cards are turned upside down so that they can be revealed and explained one by one when explaining the framework.

**Organisation of cards along the domains on the Cynefin pin board (phase 2.3.)**



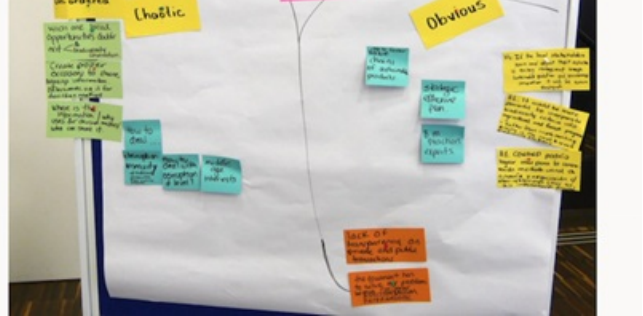
**Example of application:**

**Reflections on concrete initiatives that can be promoted (phase 3)**



African Centre for Career Enhancement & Skills Support (Access)

[Terms of Use](#)



### Findings and outcomes

The workshop revealed many insights, some of which are listed in the following:

- In some areas we have delayed concrete activities that are holding back certain activities. We just have to realise them (clear domain).
- In many intervention fields that are planned in the project there is a need for much more network and knowledge sharing work with the local partners to better understand what is really needed and who is really interested (complex domain).
- There is a need for more “safe to fail experiments” to identify what really works and where people and interest groups are buying in and are supporting the process.
- There are areas where we need deeper analysis with the partners (understanding the value chain linkages in the two value chains and the key challenges). Here we need participatory field analysis and the involvement of experts in the agricultural and IT sector (complicated domain).
- We were starting with a grant scheme for certain projects without a clear definition and without having clear what the criteria for this grant were. It led to the handing out of funding support to projects that were not really innovative. The decision was taken to stop the grants for the moment to not create the wrong expectation in the community that the project is active (chaotic domain).
- Other activities and decisions in the workshop increased the awareness of the project team on the realm of the complex domain. The team realised that many planned initiatives in the project require much more involvement and partnership with the local stakeholders. Testing and experimenting with the partners requires more work and a more participatory approach but it finally leads to stronger ownership and stronger system awareness for all parties involved. It also provides the chance to learn about and within the system with the partners.

### Templates, Graphics for download

The Cynefin Company is the author of the framework and provides much information on the Cynefin model.  
<https://thecynefin.co>

### Additional format/references

#### Reading

Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007): A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making, Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making>

#### Videos

Dave J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone introduce the Cynefin model:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8>

Podcast with Dave J. Snowden: <https://systemicinsight.libsyn.com/an-interview-with-dave-snowden>

🕒Revision #18

★Created 12 April 2021 15:48:49 by Petra Riedinger

✎Updated 2 August 2022 18:51:15 by Admin



African Centre for Career Enhancement & Skills Support (Access)

[Terms of Use](#)