Cynefin Framework

Not every problem should be handled in the same way. The Cynefin Framework helps us see what kind of situation we are in before we decide. Dave Snowden developed it at IBM around 1999, and in 2007 he and Mary Boone explained it for leaders in the Harvard Business Review. Cynefin is a Welsh word that is often translated as habitat, the place where we live and work. The framework has five domains: clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, and confusion in the middle.

1. Clear

In a clear situation, the link between cause and effect is obvious to everyone. The right answer is known, so we use best practice. The rule here is sense, categorise, respond: we see the facts, put them in a known category, and apply the standard answer. The main danger is complacency, because a clear situation can change quietly while we keep following the old routine.

Example: A customer returns a shirt with the receipt, inside the return period. The shop follows the clear rule: sense, categorise, respond, and applies the refund policy. The customer leaves happy after two minutes.

At work: Fadi, an operations manager at an online store, receives many requests from customers who forgot their passwords. He uses the clear rule: sense, categorise, respond, and the support team follows a short checklist. Every request is solved in minutes.

2. Complicated

In a complicated situation, cause and effect can be found, but only with analysis or expert knowledge. There may be several good answers, so we use good practice. The rule here is sense, analyse, respond: we collect the facts, ask experts to study them, and then act. The danger is analysis paralysis, when we keep studying and never decide.

Example: A car makes a strange noise, and the cause is not obvious. The driver follows the complicated rule: sense, analyse, respond, and a mechanic tests the engine step by step. The test finds a worn belt, and one repair solves the problem.

At work: Deliveries at Fadi's store are getting slower every week. He uses the complicated rule: sense, analyse, respond, and a logistics expert studies the delivery data. One warehouse route causes most of the delays, and changing it brings delivery times back to normal.

3. Complex

In a complex situation, cause and effect can only be understood afterwards, when we look back. Many people and factors affect each other, so no expert can predict the result. The rule here is probe, sense, respond: we run small, safe experiments, watch what happens, then grow what works and stop what does not. The danger is forcing one fixed plan onto a situation that keeps changing.

Example: Parents want their teenager to enjoy reading, and no single method is sure to work. They follow the complex rule: probe, sense, respond, and try comics, audiobooks and library visits. The audiobooks catch on, so the parents offer more of them.

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At work: Customers are leaving the store's app, and nobody knows why. Fadi uses the complex rule: probe, sense, respond, and the team runs three small tests for two weeks. A simpler checkout page keeps more customers, so the team rolls it out to everyone.

4. Chaotic

In a chaotic situation, there is no clear link between cause and effect, and no time to study it. This is the domain of crises, where the first job is to stop the damage. The rule here is act, sense, respond: we act quickly to bring some order, see what changed, and then respond. Once the situation is stable, it usually moves into another domain.

Example: A pan catches fire in the kitchen. The cook follows the chaotic rule: act, sense, respond, and covers the pan before anything else. When the fire is out, the damage is checked calmly.

At work: On the biggest sale day of the year, the store's website suddenly stops working. Fadi uses the chaotic rule: act, sense, respond, and switches to a simple backup page at once. Sales continue, and only then does the team look for the cause.

5. Confusion

Confusion is the domain in the middle, where we do not yet know which of the other four domains we are in. In the 2007 article, it was called disorder. Here people usually choose the approach they like best, even when it does not fit. The way out is to break the situation into smaller parts and to place each part in its own domain.

Example: A family moving to a new home feels overwhelmed by a long list of tasks. They leave confusion by breaking the move into parts: booking the truck is clear, while the budget is complicated. The move becomes manageable.

At work: Fadi's team argues because everyone sees the problems differently. He leaves confusion by breaking the problems into parts: passwords are clear, deliveries are complicated, and the app is complex. Each part now gets its own approach and its own owner.

Conclusion

In summary, the Cynefin Framework helps us match our decisions to our situation. Clear situations need best practice, complicated ones need experts, complex ones need small experiments, and chaotic ones need fast action first. When we are in confusion, we break the situation into parts. Before every big decision, the key question is simple: what kind of situation are we really in?

Sources

- Snowden, D. J. and 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
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