



## TOOL | The Cynefin Framework: Defining a Collaborative Problem or Opportunity

Not all problems require the same approach. In fact, by understanding the nature of the problem the collaborative or community is facing, we can better determine a strategy or strategies to resolve that problem, dilemma, or opportunity.

[A Leader's Framework for Decision-Making](#), published in the Harvard Business Review in November 2007, provides an excellent overview of David Snowden's Cynefin Framework. For more in-depth and updated information about it, visit the [Cynefin's open-source wiki page](#).

### DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROBLEMS

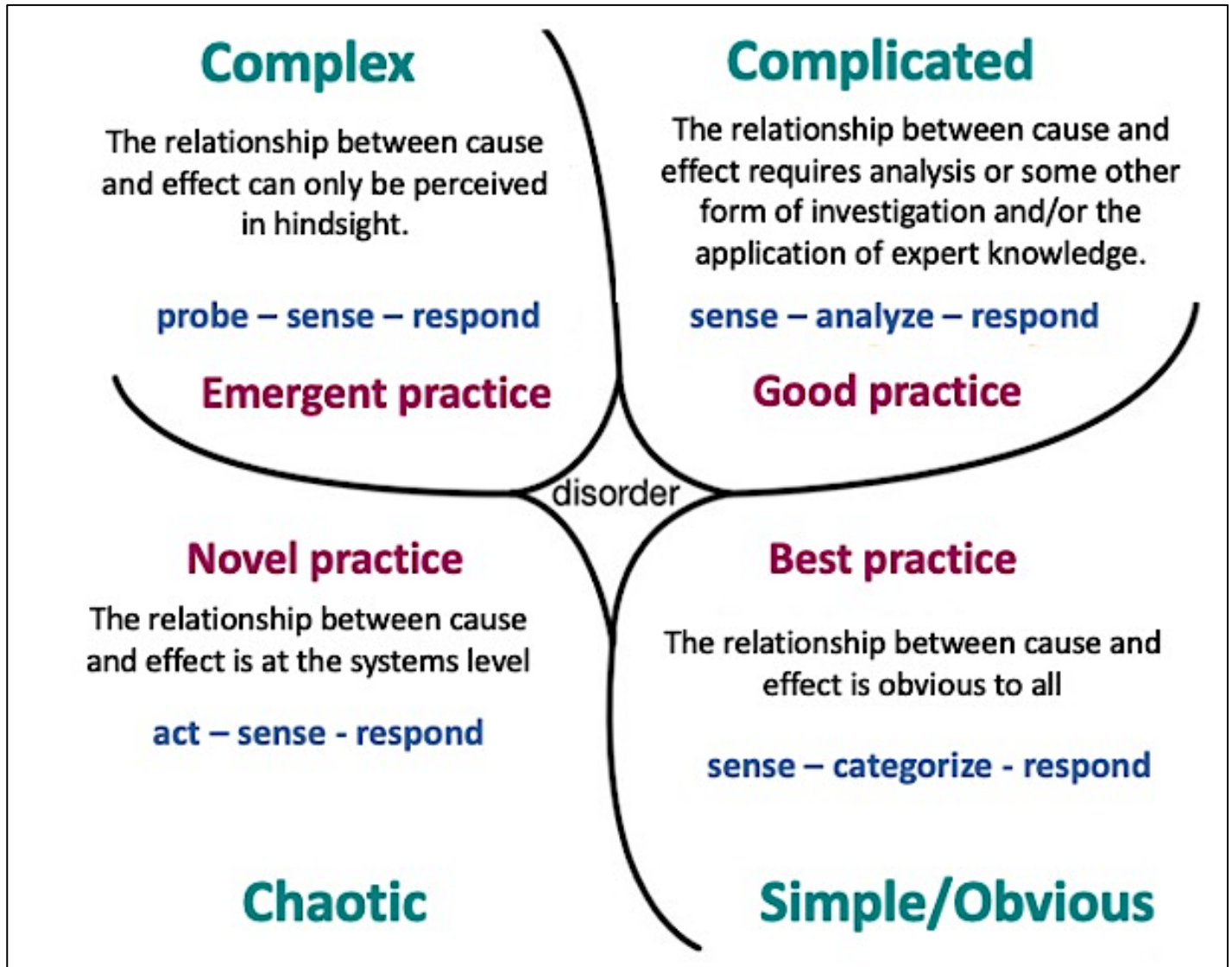
**Obvious or simple problems** can be solved by following a recipe. The solution is obvious and can be achieved through independent action.

**Complicated or technical problems** require the application of expert or content knowledge. Often, complicated problems benefit from collaborative actions.

**Complex problems** present more challenges and require the involvement of individuals with both content and context information. Examples of complex problems include solving poverty, addressing homelessness, and building community resilience. The relationship between the cause of the problem and effect are not always clear.

**Chaotic problems** require quick action to address the source of the problem. Innovation may occur during the action which may lead to systems level shifts, changes, or impacts.

The Cynefin Framework is useful for diagnosing different problems and determining a strategy for addressing the problem. It is also useful to note that embedded in complex problems there might be elements which can be simple, complicated, or chaotic. This tool helps to consider the different elements of the collaborative challenge.



**Step 1: Defining the Collaborative Challenge or Problem**

**Complex**

**Complicated**

disorder

**Chaotic**

**Simple/Obvious**

**The Collaborative Problem/ Opportunity:**

- What parts of your problem are found in the different sections of the Cynefin Framework?
- Place the parts of the problem in the sections that apply.

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**Step 2: Determine your Strategy or Solution Approach**

**Complex**  
**Probe – sense – respond**  
 Develop small prototypes, learn as you go and look for solutions you haven't tried

**Complicated**  
**Sense – analyze – respond**  
 Look for good practice solutions. Bring in the experts to solve the problem

disorder

**Chaotic**  
**Act – sense – respond**  
 Act immediately to resolve the problem. Look for innovation once the crisis is resolved

**Simple/Obvious**  
**Sense – categorize – respond**  
 Focus on the obvious solution...delivering a program or service

**The Collaborative Problem/ Opportunity:**

Describe how you might develop a collaborative problem solving strategy in each of the sections.

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### Step 3: Reflection Questions

As you go through the process of defining the problem or challenge your collaboration is seeking to solve, consider the following questions.

1. What do we know already about the collaborative problem or opportunity?
2. What additional information might be helpful? What data is important?
3. What is the current community context? Are there others interested in or already working to resolve this problem?
4. Are there sufficient human and financial resources available? How might we secure the resources?
5. What questions do we have now? Is a collaborative effort necessary to solve this problem or opportunity?