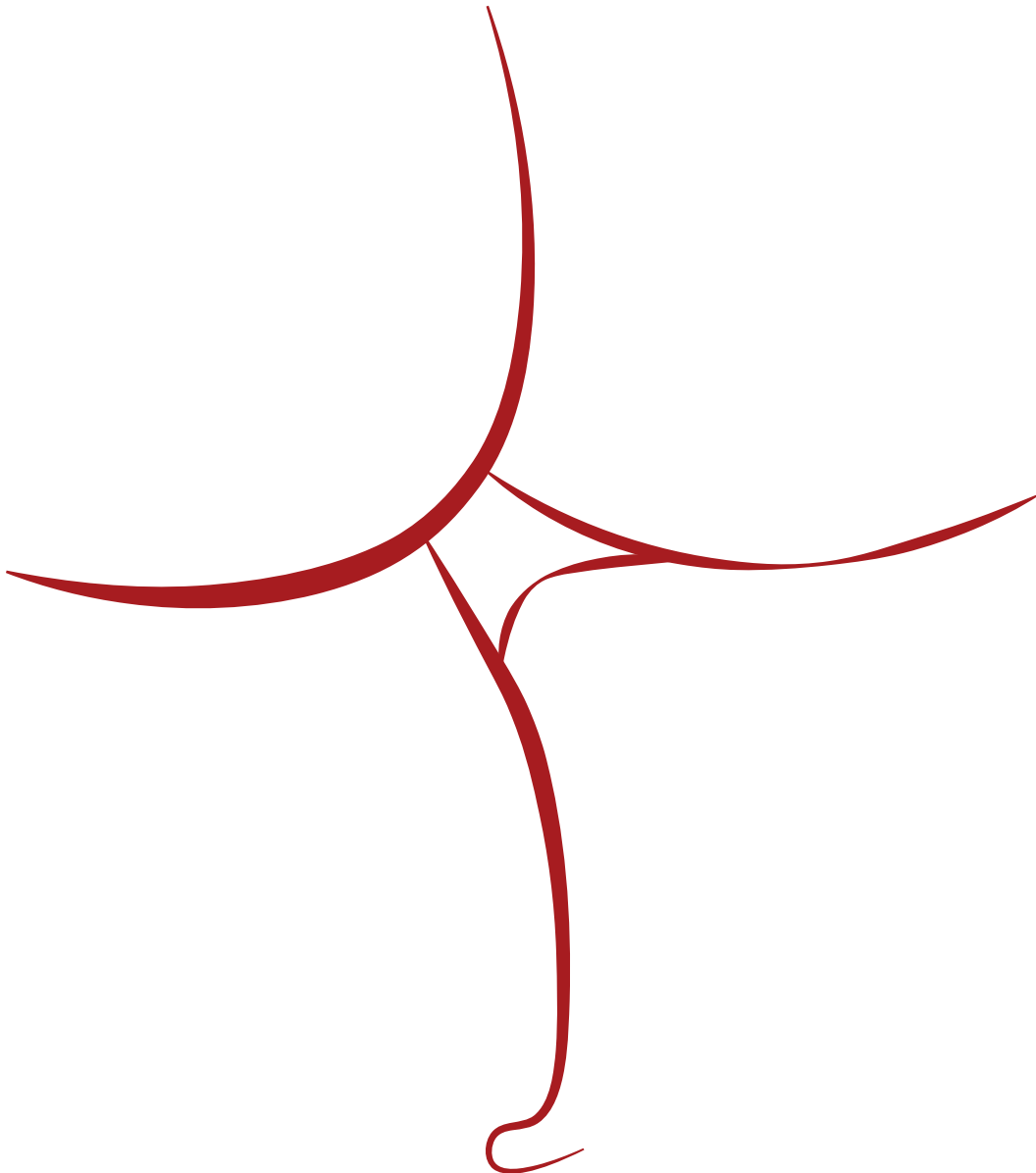# Leadership in Complexity

An appreciation of Cyenfin

Patti Scott & John O'Brien

Cynefin • kin-ev-in • a framework to support decision making by identifying the way differences in context affect approaches to problem solving. It's author is Dave Snowden (thecynefin.co)

This document represents our best current understanding of Snowden's work, which continues to grow and change. We have simplified the material to provide a basic introduction. No endorsement by Dave Snowden should be implied.

For more about Cynefin and related concepts and methods, visit thecynefin.co, consult the Cynefin Wiki, and read Dave Snowden & Friends (2021) *Cynefin: Weaving sense-making into the fabric of our world*.

—

Patti Scott is CEO of Neighbours, Inc a New Jersey organization she founded in1995 to assist people with developmental disabilities to have a life rich in community experiences and opportunities for meaning. neighbours-inc.com

John O'Brien learns about building the Beloved Community from people with developmental disabilities, their families, and their allies. inclusion.com

—

This material is available on video.

Patti's Conversation with Cynefin

A pathway to Cynefin

A pathway to Cynefin

Many of us are concerned that system changes are making life worse for people with disabilities, their families, and those who work for them. Detailed rules choke self-direction, risk assessments dominate initiative and innovation, and person-centered planning has been taken over by regulations and driven by computer screens.

We think that one reason for these dehumanizing trends is a fundamental misunderstanding of the kind of leadership necessary to support good lives. Our systems treat all of our work as if it were a matter of correctly repeating clear procedures and implementing evidence based practices to attain clear and objectively measurable goals. In our experience, this is a fatal error. The best opportunities for people and their communities emerge when we work together in complexity, learning what more is possible by trying many small experiments in situations where multiple results are possible..

Dave Snowden has developed a way to make sense of the world so we can all act more effectively in it. He named it Cynefin.

Cynefin is a framework that supports us to match our methods to the context of the problem we intend to solve. We have found it very helpful.

Snowden is Welsh and chose to label the framework Cynefin, a hard to translate word that can be said to mean " the place of our multiple belongings". It reminds us that multiple, intertwined, ever changing and never fully understood factors in our context influence how we think, interpret, and act.

Snowden, who roots his thinking in natural sciences and anthropology, begins by identifying three distinct types of systems that exist in nature. Each has a distinct relationship between cause and effect. Each sets a different context for our work and validates different methods of working.

In **Ordered** systems we can predict the result of correct action. Our understanding of cause and effect lets us say: "If we do this, that will happen & if we do this again, the same thing will happen again."

The other two types of natural systems are unpredictable and so **Unordered**. In **Chaotic** systems the lack of knowable causes says: "Unless we establish limits we can't know what will happen." In **Complex** systems unpredictable interactions say: "If we do this, multiple results are possible." Complexity makes room to discover new possibilities.

The Cynefin framework builds on this foundation in nature to identify five domains. Cynefin separates the ordered space into a context where the correct action is **Clear** –obvious to a trained actor– and a context which is **Complicated**, where expert analysis and advice can identify reliable ways to achieve a defined goal. It also adds a fifth place for situations in which we are uncertain about which of the four contexts our work lies in.

Cynefin doesn't promote one domain over others. It offers a way to check that our methods line up with the nature of the work we want to do.

UNORDERED   *ORDERED*

Complex   Complicated

?

Chaotic   Clear
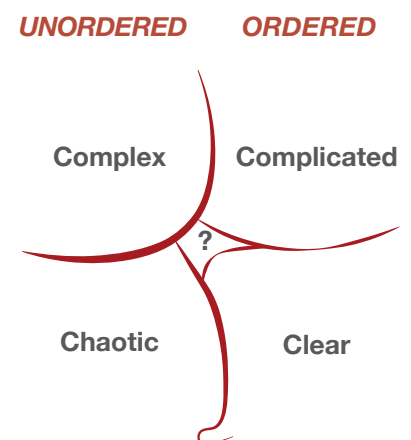
Clear is the domain of reliability and efficiency. Correctly following procedure will produce predictable results. The task is to follow instructions by sensing the problem, categorizing to assign the correct procedure, and responding. Evaluation will identify and refine **Best Practice**. Effective performers **sense** the need for action, **categorize** the situation by selecting the correct policy or procedure, and **respond** by correctly following the policy. .

This is the space in which desired results come with least effort. Clear does not necessarily mean easy: a procedure may have many steps and require skilled performance under difficult conditions.

In the **Complicated** domain a good understanding of cause and effect allows expert analysts to define the steps to a measurable goal. The task is to identify experts and follow their advice. Reflection on experience identifies Good Practice, a collection of options likely to lead to success when they can be implemented. Effective approaches sense the domain, arrange expert analysis, and follow advice.

In the **Chaotic** domain there is no known relationship between actions and what happens as a result. The task is to set limits that will shift the work into one of the other domains. Each action represents a **Novel Practice**. Effective approaches act to create limits, sense the initial results, and respond to shift the work to one of the other domains.

In **Complexity** interactions among people result in unpredictable outcomes, some desirable and others not. Intentional probes –small, contained innovations that shift what can be changed– reveal new possibilities, some of which are worth amplifying. The task is to probe in a variety of ways to discover what more is possible. **Innovative Practice** shapes useful probes.

The central space is one of **Uncertainty or Confusion**. It is the place to stand back and ask the nature of the context for the work we want to do. If we fail to acknowledge and pursue the question, we tend to fall back to what we've always done, which may lead us into the wrong approach.

An example. As more and more system administrators seek to offer person centered plans that conform to regulations they tend to set the work in Clear, as if we already knew the steps to achieve every feasible goal. They define best practices, offer tools and require standardized training, publish regulations and monitor compliance. This pushes practice toward uniformity and efficiency. It makes person-centered planning gray and rote for all but the most energized, It leads to complacency.

We think it makes more sense to set person-centered planning in Complexity. Each plan and the action that follows is a probe searching for What more is possible for a particular person in their own home, workplace, neighborhood, and community. As probes multiply, failing practices will be discarded with their lessons learned and good practices will emerge and some will become routine, shifting from the Complex to one of the Ordered domains.

We believe that Cynefin offers a way of making sense of our world that allows us to do our work in a more artful way.

The real work

Complex   **Complicated**

?

Chaotic   **Clear**

System demand
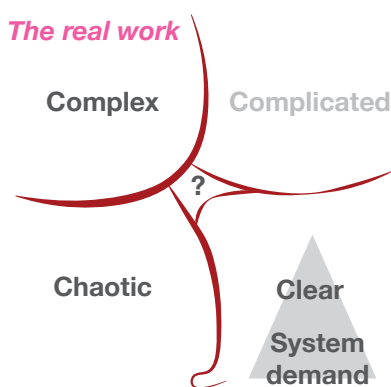
Innovative Practice
*Probe to discover
what more is possible*

Complex

probe
└ sense
  └ respond

Good Practice
Follow expert advice

Complicated

sense
└ analyze
  └ respond

?

Novel Practice
Set limits

Chaotic

act
└ sense
  └ respond

Best Practice
Follow instructions

Clear

sense
└ categorize
  └ respond

Patti's conversation with Cynefin

Cynefin has made a big difference for me and for my work, so I'm excited by the chance to share my experiences and thinking.

My conversation with Cynefin began five or six hears ago. Neighbours, Inc, our organization, is firmly rooted in the value of supporting people to have a life rich in meaning through friendships and relationships, included in neighborhood and community life. From the beginning we have been structured to provide individualized support for people to live in their own homes. At the time I met Cynefin, a number of the people we work for were living the kind of lives we are committed to support. But with some other people we were feeling stuck, and unsettled about how to approach the stuckness.

I found a new way to frame our stuckness when I joined friends to attend an [Art of Hosting](#) workshop. At some point in the three-day workshop Chris Corrigan[1] made a short talk on Cynefin as a way to engage complexity. In about 45 minutes a different way to look at and make sense of my work opened up. I discovered a way to understand and take purposeful action to make meaningful changes in the way we work.

Further study, conversation and, most important, applying the Cynefin framework to improving and evaluating the way we at Neighbours, Inc do our work, continues my conversation with Cynefin.[2]

As I looked at our work with the Cynefin framework, I began to understand three things that contributed to our stuckness.
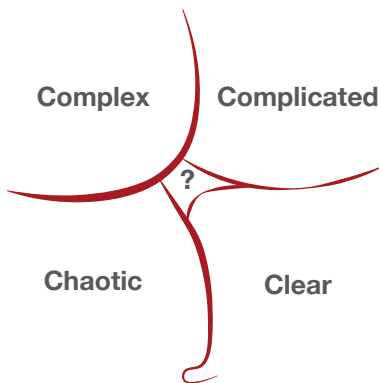
- The system sets us up to work in an Ordered way. The work we want to do is Complex.
- Many people are uncomfortable working in Complexity and gravitate to Ordered ways of working.
- We were not thinking about which domains our work fell into.

Doing Complex work in a system that wants Order

We work in a system that treats our work as if it could all be done on the ordered side of things. Its about billing forms, and progress notes, and audits. This is OK as far as it does. We do have to do the Clear and Complicated work the system requires. But the work that matters most to us, supporting people to have a great community life, falls into a whole different realm, the realm of Complexity. In the Complex domain, we don't have answers. The environment continually changes. Best practices and expert advice can't take us where we want to go with the people we work for. We have to figure things out by trying stuff, probing and prototyping in small, safe ways to learn from what we discover. We develop by building on things that generate energy and

Complex   Complicated

?

Chaotic   Clear

When working in complexity, **safe** means that if the probe fails no one will be hurt, we won't lose too much money, and we won't wind up on the front page s of the newspaper.

---

1 Chris Cprrigan, an Art of Hosting leader, applies his Cynefin informed understanding of complexity in his work as a facilitator of collective wisdom in organizational development. See his [thoughts on Cynefin here](#).

2 For an early attempt to understand Support Coordination from a Cynefin perspective: John O'Brien & Patti Scott (2018). [Working in Complexity: Support Coordination](#).

seem to work and stop doing things that don't work.

In Complexity we value and expect safe failures. One of the things Chris Corrigan said when he introduced me to Cynefin was that if we weren't failing something like 60% of the time, and learning from it, we're not really trying enough new stuff. We're keeping it too safe. Not innovating.

## Increasing comfort with Complexity

This space of uncertainty can be really uncomfortable for some people. That's not true for me. I love not knowing what might happen. I love trying new things .I thrive in Complexity. But I've found that many humans don't share my feelings. They gravitate to Ordered work. The like plans with clear goals and measures. They want to know the 10 or 15 or fifty clear steps they have to check off in order to have done a good job.

To work in Complexity, the only space where we can discover what more is possible for the people we work for, we need to embrace uncertainty, sit with the discomfort of not coming up with answers right away.

We've had to think about how to lead differently so people can embrace the beauty, uncertainty, and discomfort of complexity and not fall back on what they have always done. We couldn't just expect people to step into Complexity. We had to figure out how to provide the culture, the space, and the leadership that worked for people.

Stepping back to identify the contexts of our work.

Once we had a framework that includes space to question as well as defining different domains of work, we realized we weren't spending time thinking about where that work fell. Some of what we did was good and created nice moments and learning, but we weren't consistently getting at the questions we really need to address. When we don't orient our work in the proper domain, we risk falling back into doing what we have always done. This mimics the system: failing to match the work of discovering how better to support good lives with the Complex domain, the system treats it as Clear, imposing new goals, new rules and regulations, new standardized practices. We have to make time to question the match between what we want to do and the way we are working.
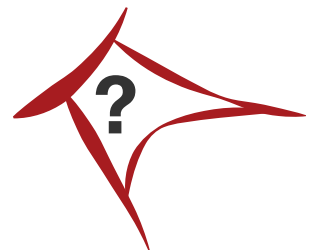
Neighborhood Walking: A probe

Building an organization confident in working in complexity is, Complex. The way to do it is to try stuff, reflect, and build by doing more of what works and less of what doesn't work. Neighborhood Walking, a practice that has grown from our initial probes, embodies stepping into Complexity. People set aside their task orientation and expectations and take time to simply notice and connect with the life of a neighborhood, reflect on what they learn, and build

on what they have experienced.[3]

The probe began when, Doug, one of the people Neighbours works for, agreed to join me, his Advisor (also called Doug), and De'Amon Harges,[4] a regular collaborator with me and Neighbours' staff. This built on De'Amon's experience in the role of Roving Listener.

At first, this idea of walking and noticing looked kind of crazy but people were willing to try because they appreciated the chance to spend time with De'Amon and me, the CEO. But it made sense as people tried it.

In Doug's neighborhood, we walked, noticed, and talked to people. That turned up gifts and interests. We noticed a number of houses with beautiful gardens, mostly done by women who liked to talk about what they were growing. That people, more men the women, liked to hang out on their stoops with a beer and talk about the Yankees. We noticed a neighbor is really into cars.

Reflecting on the experience of walking and learning led to another probe. Doug and his team invited his neighbors to a party. No one from the neighborhood came. Doug and De'Amon and three of us from Neighbours came and enjoyed ourselves. By many estimations the party was a failure. But that was OK; it was a safe fail. Nobody got hurt, we didn't wind up in the paper, we only lost the cost of some food, and those of who were there had fun. We also learned more about the ways neighbors did not connect. At our next gathering, we shared the story and celebrated the failure and its lessons.

As time passed many small probes brought stronger connections. Joining the after work conversation with beer. Offering the gardeners a gift of mums at the right time to plant them. Helping out with a neighbor's garden. Doug planting his own garden. Making conversation from another neighbor's interest in cars.

Neighborhood Walking is becoming a reliable practice as more and more people purposefully notice their neighborhoods and make small experiments based on what they see.

Some of the reasons we think this has worked to strengthen our confidence in trying stuff (or working in Complexity by testing possibilities with probes).

- Both the CEO (me) and the Executive Director (Sandi) invest our own time in designing and carrying out the probes. We live what we talk about.

- De'Amon, a valuable resource to the whole organization is directly involved.

---

3 The video of this talk has more detailed stories of this and two other probes. Three videos from inclusion.com's *Ideas That Matter* series explain the process and its relationships to community building in detail. Patti Scott & Kim Thurston-Brown, *Creating Practices While Discovering Our Neighbourhoods*.

4 De'Amon describes his role on this planet as a social banker. He utilizes the intangible currencies that are cultivated and used by human assets and relationships to build a more abundant community. He is the creator of The Learning Tree, a neighborhood organization in Indianapolis. You can learn more about Social Banking in these videos.

- Probes happen where people are.
- When direct support workers are involved, Advisors and the Director fill in to free-up their time.
- Small grants are available to support trying new stuff that opens new ways for people to give their gifts and pursue their interests.
- Reflection is built-in. Each walk or experience closes with reflection and commitments to what people will try next. Groups gather to share stories, learn together, and figure out what's next. Lately we have adopted the practice of making one or two minute videos to capture reflections and commitments.