# Simple, Complex, Chaotic ... How do I move forward?

By David Shaked

In their excellent Cynefin framework[1], David Snowden and Mary Boone introduced four domains of sense-making that can be applied to the reality around us. The framework is particularly useful to those of us working with or within organisations on OD, change and improvement initiatives. In this article, I suggest different approaches we can adopt to support organisational change in each one of these domains.

This brief definition, based on that by Snowden and Boone, recaps the different domains in the framework:

Complex | Complicated

Chaotic | Simple
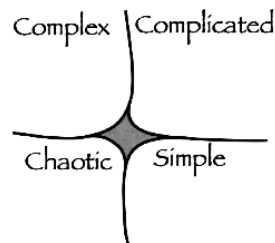
1. The 'Simple' domain – In a simple situation, cause and effect relationships are relatively easy to identify. The situation is predictable and can be determined in advance. Normally, there is a 'right answer' or 'right solution'. Typical problems in this domain stem from process failures. The framework suggests decision making in simple situations start with sensing the situation, then categorising and finally responding accordingly.

2. The 'Complicated' domain – In a complicated situation, there is also a cause-and-effect relationship which implies there is a right answer. However, the link between the cause and its effect is not self-evident and requires the use of analytical models. Often that expertise does not exist within the unit, organisation or system and therefore requires bringing in expertise from outside the system. In fact, problems in this domain are often due to a lack of time, data or resources for analysis. In this category, the framework suggests the best decision-making starts with sensing the situation, then analysing it and finally responding accordingly.

3. The 'Complex' domain – Cause and effect do not exist in a complex situation. We can only infer the cause in hindsight (and doing so will not help us deal with future situations). If a system is experiencing a complex situation, there are often unpredictable, emergent outcomes. Optimal decision making starts with probing the situation, making sense of what

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[1] David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. Harvard Business Review, November 2007.

we find out and then responding accordingly.

4. The 'Chaotic' domain – It is not possible to determine cause-and-effect relationships in chaotic systems. Outcomes are completely unpredictable. The framework suggests we first act, then make sense of the situation, and finally respond accordingly.

What does it all mean in the context of organisational development and process improvement?

The approaches, processes and tools we use to think about, analyse, make sense of and act on when driving organisational change must relate directly to these domains. In fact, if we use the wrong approach for a given situation we will, at best, waste time and achieve no results. At worst, we may drive the system in the wrong direction or may affect it negatively with our intervention!

What approaches work best for each of these domains?

1. Simple – In this domain, using tools to analyse cause-and-effect relationships is particularly helpful. Tools such as fish-bone analysis, affinity diagrams, process maps and force-field analysis are particularly useful here. Several classic Lean Thinking tools are also useful in this domain.

2. Complicated – In this domain, the best way to find cause-and-effect relationships is through analysis. Often more complex approaches and tools for diagnosing the situation should be used. If the complicated situation is an operational process, Six Sigma is particularly useful, as are other data modelling and diagnosis tools and approaches. More advanced Lean Thinking tools can be useful in moving forward and in implementing solutions. If the complicated situation is more of an organisational process based on human interactions, classic OD diagnosis tools should be used and, based on the finding, a solution should be suggested.
The fact that cause-and-effect relations exist but are harder to identify simply by observation requires the power of these analytical tools. Often, there is a need to bring in an OD or process improvement expert to help with the analysis.

3. Complex – The unpredictable and emergent nature of complex systems means that analysing and diagnosing a situation in order to find solutions is not the best approach. It is far better to convene the whole system (or representatives of the whole system) and facilitate a dialogue process. Useful ideas and solutions can be released through dialogue, as well as greater consensus and engagement. Useful approaches include: Appreciative Inquiry, World Café, Open Space, Future Search and other technologies that foster dialogue, reflection and emergence.

Open ended and emergent coaching (such as Solution Focus or Clean Language) can also assist individuals in this system as they navigate through the complex situation.

4. Chaotic – As already suggested by Snowden and Boone, in a chaotic situation, the best way forward is to take a step: any step that makes sense in the situation is a good step. Taking one step can potentially help the system learn something new or even shift to another domain.

As you can see, the fact that organisations, processes and systems can be in different domains and even shift between domains over time means that we can no longer adopt one primary way of operating as change agents to help our clients. It is essential we are able to support the systems we work with using multiple different approaches, or at least point clients in the right direction. I hope this article helps you be a more effective change agent for your clients' systems.

About the Author:

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