

The Cynefin Framework and Making Sense of Life Events

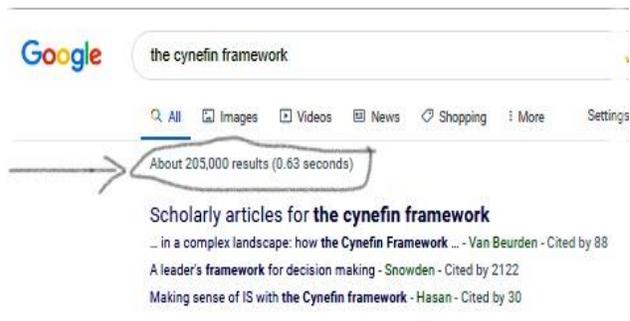
A Blog/Essay by Josefina Howard, Student - HHP 630, Fall 2019, FHSU

In September 2019, my online Healthcare Administration class introduced me to a new concept called “Cynefin Framework.” I have never heard of it before! The term sounded to me like an engineering formula, a building construction framework, or a complex production process!

My initial readings about the Cynefin Framework reminded me of the OODA Loop, (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act). OODA Loop is a four-step approach to decision-making. It focuses on: 1) filtering available information, 2) putting it in context, and 3) quickly making the most appropriate decision while also understanding that changes can be made as more data becomes available. As a spouse of a retired naval aviator, I am very familiar with OODA Loop as our family lived in hostile environments overseas for seventeen years. My husband taught me and our two sons the OODA Loop strategy to be able to safely adapt to our locations and situations. But Cynefin Framework is different than OODA Loop.

As a final class assignment, I chose to write about the Cynefin Framework and how it can be used to make sense of unplanned life events. Most articles written about the Cynefin Framework focus on its application to management and problem-solving in organizations, healthcare, businesses, and workplaces. A quick Google search for “the cynefin framework”

yielded about 205,000 results in .63 seconds that include videos, images, scholarly articles, websites, etc.; quite impressive and overwhelming! How about using the Cynefin Framework to make sense of personal life events?



Until recently, I was not sure how I would write about the Cynefin Framework as it applies to life events; especially to my life events. Just before midnight on November 6, 2019, my siblings in the Philippines, Singapore, and Hongkong called me through Facebook Messenger Video Chat. One of our three brothers had a massive heart attack and was immediately placed on life-support; he slipped into a diabetic comatose! I remember that at least six family members were waiting during the video-chat. We all scrambled to figure out how to get to our brother fast. It was especially difficult for me in the US and relatives in other countries to make quick travel arrangements! It was pure chaos and disorder! Today, as I try to make sense of how our family members reacted and dealt with the loss of a loved one and the confusion of those moments, I knew I had to learn more about the Cynefin Framework and write this blog/essay.

My instructor, Dr. Jamie Schwandt (a firm believer, leader, practitioner, and proponent of Swarm Learning), allowed our class to do independent research and utilize free online resources like Wikipedia; it was a fresh breath of air for me as an online student!

What exactly is “The Cynefin Framework?” The Cynefin Framework:

- Is pronounced as /kəˈnevɪn/ kuh-NEV-in in Welsh language.
- Is a conceptual framework used to aid decision-making?
- Offers five decision-making contexts or "domains" that help managers identify how they perceive situations and make sense of their own and other people's behavior.
 - Obvious (known until 2014 as Simple)
 - Complicated
 - Complex
 - Chaotic
 - and Disorder.
- Draws on research into systems theory, complexity theory, network theory and learning theories.

For newbies like myself, it is important to streamline the information down to the basics for brevity, simplicity, and clarity. The following paragraphs discuss the background, applications, and criticisms of the Cynefin Framework:

- **BACKGROUND:**
 - Terminology
 - *sense of place* - The idea of the Cynefin framework is that it offers decision-makers a "sense of place" from which to view their perceptions
 - *habitat, haunt, acquainted, familiar* - Cynefin is a Welsh word meaning habitat, haunt, acquainted, familiar. Dave Snowden, the creator of The Cynefin Framework, uses the term “cynefin” to refer to the idea that we all have connections, such as tribal, religious and geographical, of which we may not be aware.
 - *turangawaewae* – The term “cynefin” has been compared to the Maori word “turangawaewae,” meaning a place to stand.
 - History
 - **1999:** David Snowden created the Cynefin Framework, then of IBM Global Services
 - **2002:** IBM Cynefin Centre for Organizational Complexity was founded by Snowden. He and Cynthia Kurtz, an IBM researcher, described the framework in detail the following year in a paper, "The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world", published in IBM Systems Journal.
 - **2004:** The Cynefin Centre was a network of members and partners from industry, government and academic; it began operating independently of IBM in 2004.
 - **2005:** Cognitive Edge was founded with the objective of building methods, tools and capability to utilize insights from Complex Adaptive Systems theory and other scientific disciplines in social systems. This approach is known variously as Naturalizing Sensemaking and Cognitive Complexity. Cynefin framework is at

the heart of Cognitive Edge's approach.

- 2007: Snowden and Mary E. Boone described the Cynefin framework in the Harvard Business Review. Their paper, "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making", won them an "Outstanding Practitioner-Oriented Publication in OB" award from the Academy of Management's Organizational Behavior division.

- DOMAINS:

- Simple / Obvious / Clear - This means that there are rules in place (or best practice), the situation is stable, and the relationship between cause and effect is clear: if you do X, expect Y. The advice in such a situation is to "sense–categorize–respond": establish the facts ("sense"), categorize, then respond by following the rule or applying best practice.
 - *sense–categorize–respond*
 - *entrained thinking*
- Complicated - The relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or expertise; there are a range of right answers. The framework recommends "sense–analyze–respond": assess the facts, analyze, and apply the appropriate good operating practice.
 - *known unknowns*
 - *sense–analyze–respond*
- Complex - Cause and effect can only be deduced in retrospect, and there are no right answers. "Instructive patterns ... can emerge," write Snowden and Boone, "if the leader conducts experiments that are safe to fail." Cynefin calls this process "probe–sense–respond".
 - *unknown unknowns*
 - *probe–sense–respond*
- Chaotic - Cause and effect are unclear. In this context, managers "act–sense–respond": act to establish order; sense where stability lies; respond to turn the chaotic into the complex
 - *too confusing to wait for a knowledge-based response*
 - *act–sense–respond*
- Disorder / Confusion - There is no clarity about which of the other domains apply. By definition, it is hard to see when this domain applies. "Here, multiple perspectives jostle for prominence, factional leaders argue with one another, and cacophony rules", write Snowden and Boone. "The way out of this realm is to break down the situation into constituent parts and assign each to one of the other four realms. Leaders can then make decisions and intervene in contextually appropriate ways."
 - *no clarity about which of the other domains apply*
- Moving Through Domains - As knowledge increases, there is a "clockwise drift" from chaotic through complex and complicated to simple.
- Similarly, a "buildup of biases", complacency or lack of maintenance can cause a "catastrophic failure": a clockwise movement from simple to chaotic, represented by the "fold" between those domains. There can be counter-clockwise movement as people die and knowledge is forgotten, or as new generations question the rules; and a counter-clockwise push from

chaotic to simple can occur when a lack of order causes rules to be imposed suddenly.

- *clockwise drift*
- *counter-clockwise movement*



Watch this 8-minute video! Dave Snowden explains the Cynefin Framework!

Or visit this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8>

- **APPLICATIONS OF THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK:**
 - IBM Developers - Was used by its IBM developers in policy-making, product development, market creation, supply chain management, branding and customer relations.
 - George W. Bush Administration - Uses include analyzing the impact of religion on policymaking within the George W. Bush administration, emergency management, network science and the military, the management of food-chain risks, homeland security in the United States, agile software development, and policing the Occupy Movement in the United States.
 - Health Care Research – Has been used in health-care research, including to examine the complexity of care in the British National Health Service, the nature of knowledge in health care, and the fight against HIV/AIDs in South Africa. In 2017 the RAND Corporation used the Cynefin framework in a discussion of theories and models of decision making.
- **CRITICISMS:**
 - Criticism of Cynefin includes that the framework is difficult and confusing, needs a more rigorous foundation, and covers too limited a selection of possible contexts.
 - Another criticism is that terms such as known, knowable, sense, and categorize are ambiguous.

- Critique of the structure of the framework: Rick Davies criticize the framework on its structure, given that it is build up as a 2x2 matrix, but without axes so the one using the framework can't identify, or see, where he or she is in the framework.
 - In response, Dave Snowden states that the Cynefin Framework is not a 2x2 matrix, but an emergent sense-making framework. He continues, that he does not like 2x2 matrices, since they create a categorization approach where people makes things fit.
 - Tom Graves, another criticizer of the Cynefin Framework, explicitly states that the framework is not a 2x2 matrix and adds that the disorder domain is fundamental for the model. He states that: "The four domains – Simple, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic – represent distinct 'ways of knowing', or ways of making sense of 'the unknown', the central domain of Disorder. The central domain always exists; the other domains are, in effect, overlays on top of Disorder."
- There seem to be an ongoing discussion on the use of- and the structure of the Cynefin Framework, especially in relation to other sense-making frameworks such as The Business Model Canvas, VPEC-T and Causal Layered Analysis



The Cynefin Framework isn't a perfect method nor a cure-all solution to resolving issues or challenges. However, to me, especially after the sudden death of one of my beloved brothers, it provides a simple and easy to remember framework – an image or diagram to group my thoughts in making sense of my family's loss off a loved one, our reaction, and resolve before, during, and after the disorder and chaos of those moments four weeks ago. Perhaps, the Cynefin Framework can be a supplemental tool for my family to process our grief and help us move forward with a plan to prepare for inevitable passing of loved ones in the future.

The painting below is an image of disorder and chaos. It is fair to say that my family was shaken to the core and felt "pure chaos" (crisis) when my brother suddenly had massive heart attacks and passed within hours (disorder)! But if one looks closer at different parts of the painting and divides the image into little square parts, one can see a little bit order and beauty; then as one steps back with that new perspective, the painting becomes a beautiful work of art. I believe that in a full-blown crisis, one's natural reaction to the situation is that of hopelessness; perceiving only disorder and chaos.



Click on the image or visit the link below to view large image

https://stockboardasset.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/635957664990267413603811869_chaos.jpg

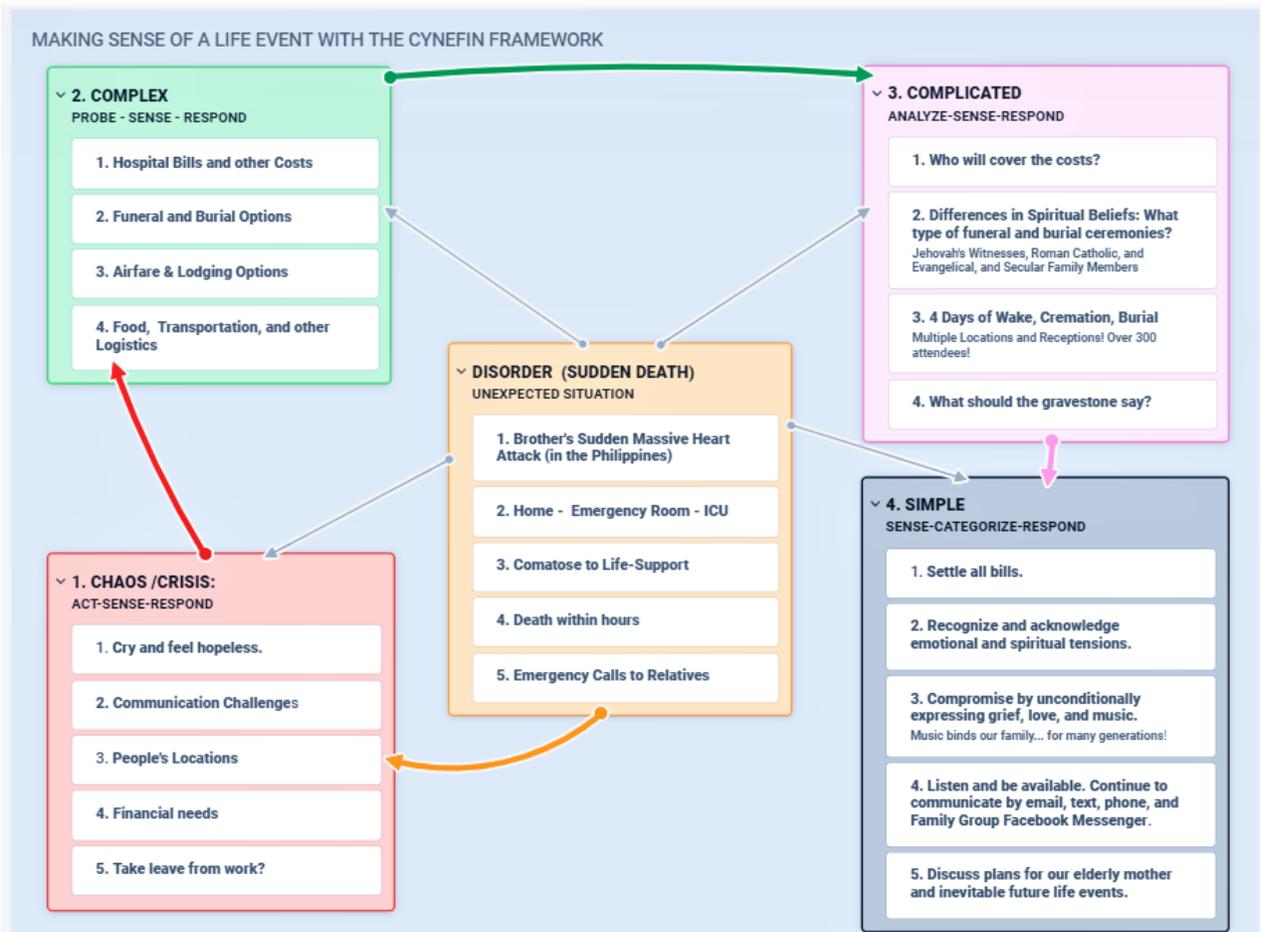
In contrast to the previous image of chaos, below is an illustration of what it looks like when Cynefin Framework is applied to a situation to make sense of disorder.



Click on the image above or visit the link below to view large image.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework#/media/File:Cynefin_framework_by_Edwin_Stoop.jpg

Now, here is my simple Plectica Map: Making Sense of a Life Event with the Cynefin Framework. This diagrams my family's response to the disorder and chaos brought about by my brother's sudden death; a clear snapshot of our family's experience.



Click on the image or visit the link below to view large image.
<https://www.plectica.com/maps/MYELDSVXC/edit/WAWWE7S3S>

I thought of several unplanned and painful life events that I have experienced in the past. To name just a few:

- 1) my father's succumbing to stomach cancer in 2015,
- 2) debilitating illnesses such as my chronic diabetes and my husband's Gulf War Syndrome diagnosis,
- 3) September 11, 2001 and how terrorism, separation, and duty-station relocation to the Middle East impacted my military family,
- 4) the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo Volcano in 1991 while our family was stationed in Subic Bay, Philippines,
- 5) natural calamities like earthquakes and flooding, and 6) other difficulties.

I see the benefits of mapping out my past experiences and responses using the Cynefin Framework. They will help me analyze different situations in their full context and glean valuable life lessons. I highly recommend that other people also try using the Cynefin Framework to make sense of their life events; it's a good investment of time that may yield lessons that will prepare them for future inevitables.

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