Tool 21: Cynefin Framework

Aim of the tool

To help participants understand the level of complexity of a situation and to explore the implications for intervention strategies.

When to use it?

This tool can be used in different phases of an MSP, but particularly at a moment when strategies for change are discussed.

What is the Cynefin Framework?

Complexity thinking can help people better understand how to intervene with systems in a structured, yet non-linear way. One practical application is the Cynefin framework (Kurtz 2003;Snowden and Boone 2007; also see the MSP Guide, Principle 1 'Embracing systemic change onpage 47-62).

David Snowden, a former director in the IBM Institute for Knowledge Management, developed the framework to help managers and leaders better understand the implications of complexity for strategy. The framework can help identify the types of leadership patterns, learning processes andintervention strategies that are appropriate for different levels of complexity.

The Cynefin framework identifies five domains:

· **Simple (or: Obvious according to the latest rendition of the Cynefin framework),** in whichthe relationship between cause and effect is obvious to all, the approach is to Sense – Categorise – Respond and we can apply best practice.
· **Complicated,** in which the relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or someother form of investigation and/or the application of expert knowledge, the approach is to Sense - Analyze - Respond and we can apply good practice.
· **Complex,** in which the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect, but not in advance, the approach is to Probe - Sense - Respond and we cansense emergent practice.
· **Chaotic**, in which there is no relationship between cause and effect at systems level, theapproach is to Act - Sense - Respond and we can discover novel practice.
· The fifth domain is **Disorder,** which is the state of not knowing what type of causality exists, in which state people will revert to their own comfort zone in making a decision.

Why use the Cynefin Framework?

In full use, the Cynefin framework has sub-domains, and the boundary between obvious and chaotic is seen as a catastrophic one: complacency leads to failure. This differentiation recognises that not everything we want to achieve in development is complex. However, it also points out that applying approaches that work for obvious and complicated situations to complex and chaotic situations will fail. For example, identifying 'best' and 'good' practices is fine for obvious and complicated situations, but fairly pointless for a more complex problem. Yet, so often this is exactly what development agencies value and demand.

In complex contexts, it is necessary to 'probe' – to experimentally test out a range of interventions to see which ones work or fail – and then use this knowledge for scaling up or replicating (Kurtz and Snowden 2003). This essentially constitutes an evolutionary approach to 'design'. In chaotic or crisis situations, high turbulence requires acting to restore some degree of order with little time or information for analysis.

Cynefin Framework - Step by step

1. *Relate your MSP case to the domains of the Cynefin framework*

   - Relate the situation of your case to the framework: where does it belong: obvious, complicated, complex (or even chaotic)?
   - Usually, parts of the problem belong to different domains: which parts of the problem belong where?

2. *Explore the implications*

What does this all mean for intervention strategies?

   - If parts of the problem are obvious or complicated, what type of interventions could be used? Has this been tried in the case?
   - If parts of the problem are complex (or even chaotic), what type of interventions would be most appropriate? Has this been tried?

Learn more

Kurtz, Cynthia and David Snowden (2003) *The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world.* IBM Systems Journal Vol 42, No 3, p 462-483.

Snowden, Dave and Mary Boone (2007) *A leader's framework for decision making.* Harvard Business Review, November issue. https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making ; https://thecynefin.co/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework