

# COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEXITY

Coaching can help leaders operating in complex contexts to make good decisions and lead others to take wise action. We often refer to situations as complex without reflecting on what that means. What makes a problem or a context complex? Some of the attributes of complexity include multiple actors and forces, all of which are impacting each other; multiple hypotheses as to what is going on in the system; no clear relationship between cause and effect; and an inability to predict what will happen as a result of any given intervention.

In relation to a problem, task, decision or process, there are three frameworks which I've found helpful in coaching leaders through complexity.

The first is the Cynefin<sup>1</sup> sense-making framework which is useful to determine whether a situation is indeed complex and, if so, to validate the use of experiments in finding a way forward.

A former colleague of mine has a helpful heuristic to determine whether a task or problem is obvious/clear (previously described as simple), complicated or complex<sup>2</sup>. A cake is a **simple** task. If you combine the right ingredients in the right sequence and subject them to the right processes, the outcome is more or less predictable (I know, I know...).

A rocket is a **complicated** task, with hundreds of thousands of components, moving parts and energies. You need an army of experts – scientists and technicians – in order to complete it. However, it can be planned for and executed sequentially and although subject to the usual problems of human error, if it is done correctly, the outcome can also be predicted (with apologies to Mr. Musk).



1. Based on the work of Dave Snowden and colleagues see <https://thecynefin.co/about-us/about-cynefin-framework/>
2. Duncan Green blog and book: From Poverty to Power <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/from-poverty-to-power-2nd-edition-how-active-citizens-and-effective-states-can-249411/>

A baby is a **complex** problem, and there isn't really a manual. When a baby cries, you do something at one end; if that doesn't work, you try doing something at the other. If that still doesn't work, you apply "love" and comfort in the form of cuddles. As the baby develops, it only becomes more complex, and it's incredibly difficult to predict how a human being will turn out as they move through adolescence to adulthood. As a parent, although the experience of others can be helpful, you can only really proceed through trial and error.

As coaches, we're used to supporting our clients to experiment with new or different ways of being and doing. Being explicit about experimentation as a strategy for decision-making and action can lend a real sense of purpose to the action-reflection cycle. The Cynefin framework's directive for navigating complexity is probe-sense-respond. In other words, if a leader can't work out the relationship between cause and effect and there are multiple hypotheses about what's going on, they need to send out a probe or conduct an experiment. They can then see what emerges as learning from it and adapt their next best step accordingly. As coaches, we can accompany the leader as they design, implement, learn from, and adapt their actions in the light of their experiments.

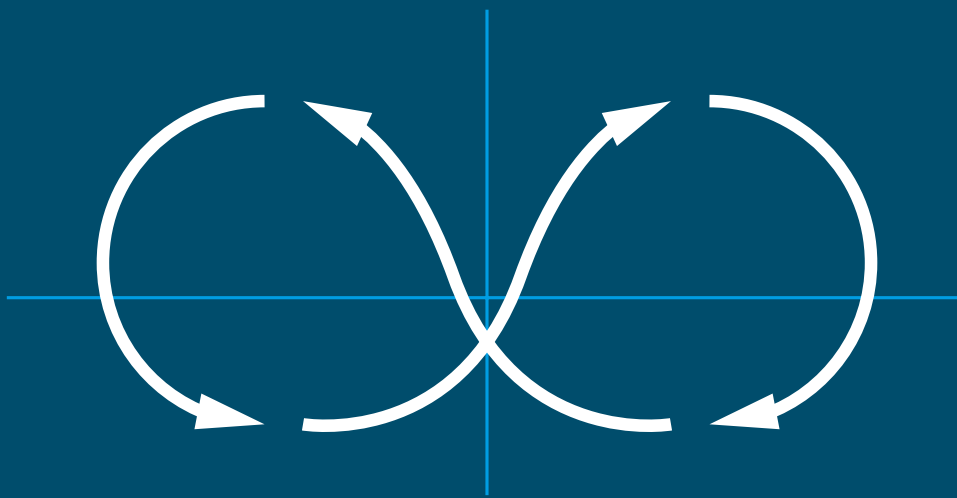


The second helpful framework is pattern recognition, based on the work of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute<sup>3</sup>. Being able to discern the patterns in a complex system is incredibly helpful in working out how to navigate it. HSD uses the notions of Containers, Differences and Exchanges to describe the workings of patterns. Containers are the boundaries of different levels and aspects of a system, such as teams, departments and even individuals within an organisation. Discerning the Differences between aspects of a system, i.e. the differences on either side of the boundaries, can help to identify potential conflicts and complementarities. Monitoring effective Exchanges across boundaries ensures that different parts of the system are collaborating to fulfil its purpose. It can be said that the health of any system is determined by the extent to which needs are met through exchanges across boundaries, and a good leader is always on the lookout for both flows and blockages.

Seeing the simple patterns in a complex system can then help the leader to decide whether Containers need to be more or less defined, with greater or lesser permeability in the boundaries. Whether Differences need to be diminished or accentuated in relation to mitigating conflict or increasing creative tensions and complementarities. And whether Exchanges, in the form of communication, resource mobilisation, or indeed any flows of information, people and ideas need to be increased, decreased or redirected.

3. <https://www.hsdinstitute.org/>

The third framework is polarity thinking<sup>4</sup>. In a complex context, where problems are wicked, binary either/or thinking is unlikely to be as helpful as both/and approaches. The two ends of a polarity are not a problem to be solved or a choice to be made but rather two dimensions of a reality where each pole has its pros and cons. The classic example is centralisation vs. decentralisation. Centralisation allows for command and control, standardisation, ease of communication and clear loyalties. Decentralisation gives us diversity, flexibility, local relevance and empowerment. Both poles have their positives as well as their negatives. In the decisions they make, the savvy leader will seek to strengthen the positives on both ends of the spectrum whilst using the negatives as early-warning signals that the downsides are not tipping the scales too far towards one end. How will we know if we're becoming either too decentralised or centralised?



Leaders need to be humble and embrace vulnerability in the face of complexity, accepting that they're not always going to be correct and, by definition, that they're going to make mistakes as they experiment, learn from the results of experimentation, and do the necessary course correction as a result of what they learn. All the while doing this in a rapid and agile fashion in order to limit costs to the business.

They're also going to have to embrace diversity, as it's only through bringing together diverse perspectives that all the permutations of a complex scenario can truly be explored and acted upon. If they lead from their own knowledge, it will always be inherently limited. If they lead from the knowledge of others, it is potentially infinite. Not all leaders are predisposed to being this open, but with the support of a good coach, all leaders can define the destination they want and, together with others, sense the opportunities and challenges that will help or hinder them. In the words of Montaigne, "no wind favours he (sic) who has no destined port".

4. Building on the work of Barry Johnson <https://www.polaritypartnerships.com/>

Organise a time to talk with Jon about what sort of coaching support your organisation and leaders might need - [jon.horsley@theocm.co.uk](mailto:jon.horsley@theocm.co.uk).