What Kind of Problem Is This?

Leader Rebellion · Cynefin · Match the response to the situation

A provisional account of the situation and a response that can change as you learn.

Open the web tool

Start here

Invite several accounts of the situation. A single project can contain different kinds of problems.

Use the response reference in this worksheet to choose a provisional response. Avoid turning the framework into a rigid sorting quiz.

Set feedback and limits, act appropriately, then revisit your account.

Response reference

Clear

Sense, categorize, respond: use an established procedure and watch for exceptions. Familiarity alone does not prove a situation is clear.

Complicated

Sense, analyze, respond: bring relevant expertise and evidence. More than one good answer may exist.

Complex

Probe, sense, respond: try bounded, safe-to-fail approaches, notice emerging patterns, and adapt. A detailed forecast is not proof.

Chaotic

Act, sense, respond: establish enough stability to limit immediate harm, then reassess. Use the appropriate emergency arrangements when needed.

Unclear

Do not force a label. Gather different accounts and break the situation into parts until a useful response becomes clearer.

Describe the situation without a solution

Choose a bounded part of the work. Separate immediate safety needs from longer-term questions.

What is known, and how do we know it?

Is cause and effect stable and agreed, discoverable through expertise, or only becoming clear through interaction? Include competing accounts.

Which domain is a useful starting point?

Choose Clear, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, or Unclear. This is a conversation, not an automatic classification of people or projects.

Choose a response suited to that account

Clear: use and monitor a known procedure. Complicated: investigate with expertise. Complex: try bounded probes and watch patterns. Chaotic: stabilize immediate harm, then reassess. Unclear: gather accounts and separate the parts.

Set boundaries and feedback before acting

For a probe, what limits the downside, who can stop it, what will you watch, and when? For urgent harm, follow the relevant emergency process.

What would make you change your approach?

Name a review date and evidence that the domain or response no longer fits. Keep disagreement visible.

A question to keep

Am I choosing the approach the situation needs, or the one I am most comfortable using?

Worked example — fictional

Describe the situation without a solution

A new peer-review routine has clear software steps, but people's willingness to challenge one another is unpredictable.

What is known, and how do we know it?

The software permissions can be checked by an administrator. The social response cannot be predicted from the rollout plan alone.

Which domain is a useful starting point?

Complex for the review behavior; complicated for the permissions issue. We will handle those separately.

Choose a response suited to that account

Check permissions with the administrator. For review behavior, try two voluntary, small review formats with explicit feedback and stop conditions.

Set boundaries and feedback before acting

Two teams opt into a two-week trial. No public performance ranking. Pause if concerns are exposed without consent. Gather short private feedback after each review.

What would make you change your approach?

Review after two weeks. If a repeatable format works across different situations, document what seems stable and what still needs adaptation.

Behind the tool

Dave Snowden developed Cynefin as a sense-making framework. It distinguishes clear, complicated, complex, and chaotic contexts, with a central space for uncertainty or confusion. This introductory activity uses "Unclear" as a plain-language starting point; it is not a full Cynefin workshop or a prediction engine.

The Cynefin Co · The framework in practice

The people closest to the work may see a different situation from the one your plan assumes. Let those accounts change the response, especially when certainty would be convenient.

The Search For Unapologetic Impracticality In Leadership: Part II - The Seduction of Certainty — Nic Payne

Keep only notes that are useful and appropriate to share.

Hope is rebellious.