

Cynefin Quick Reference

The right method for every project situation

Agile Forge
agile-forge.com
Philip Müller

The Cynefin framework (Welsh for **habitat**, pronounced **ku-NEV-in**) helps you classify situations — before deciding how to act. Developed by Dave Snowden, IBM, 1999. Core idea: not all situations are alike. The right method depends on the context.

COMPLEX

Complex

The solution emerges through experimentation. Cause and effect only become visible in hindsight.

- New product development
- Introducing AI in a team
- Organisational transformation
- Building a new space capsule (SpaceX)

→ **Scrum / agile — iterate, test, learn**

Probe → Sense → Respond. Short feedback loops are decisive.

CLEAR

Clear

The solution is obvious and well known. Proven best practices are enough.

- Processing a standard order
- Fixing a known error message
- Routine reporting
- Onboarding by checklist

→ **Best practices and standard playbooks**

Sense → Categorise → Respond. Scrum would be pure overhead.

COMPLICATED

Complicated

A solution can be found, but it takes expertise and analysis. Several good paths are possible.

- Making an architecture decision
- Developing a business plan
- Building a new aircraft model
- Optimising known supply chains

→ **Classic PM / waterfall can work**

Sense → Analyse → Respond. Expert judgement required.

CHAOTIC

Chaotic

No discernible patterns. Crisis. Immediate action comes before any analysis.

- Production outage
- Data breach / security incident
- Acute project crisis
- Total system failure

→ **Act first, then analyse**

Act → Sense → Respond. Clear decision authority and fast escalation.

CONFUSED (centre): When it is unclear which domain you are in — classify deliberately first, then choose a method.

3 classification questions for everyday project work

1. Do we know the solution in advance?

Yes, obviously → Clear

Yes, findable with expertise → Complicated

No, it emerges through experimentation → Complex

2. What happens if we are wrong?

Low impact → Complicated / Clear, analysis pays off

High impact under uncertainty → Complex, take small steps

3. How does the situation change through our actions?

Little → Complicated or Clear

Strongly → Complex. The environment reacts, and we must react with it.

Real-world example: SpaceX vs. Boeing

In 2014 both received a NASA contract: develop a crew capsule.

Boeing → COMPLICATED mindset

Detailed planning, fixed specifications, proven processes. Right for known systems, wrong for a novel capsule. In 2024, Boeing astronauts were stuck on the ISS for nine months.

SpaceX → COMPLEX mindset

Iterate, test, fail, learn. Every failure is a data point. First successful crewed mission in 2020 — routine operations ever since.

Boeing got more money. SpaceX won.