

# The Cynefin Framework and the Role of Large Group Interventions in Facilitating Communication in Conditions of Organizational Complexity

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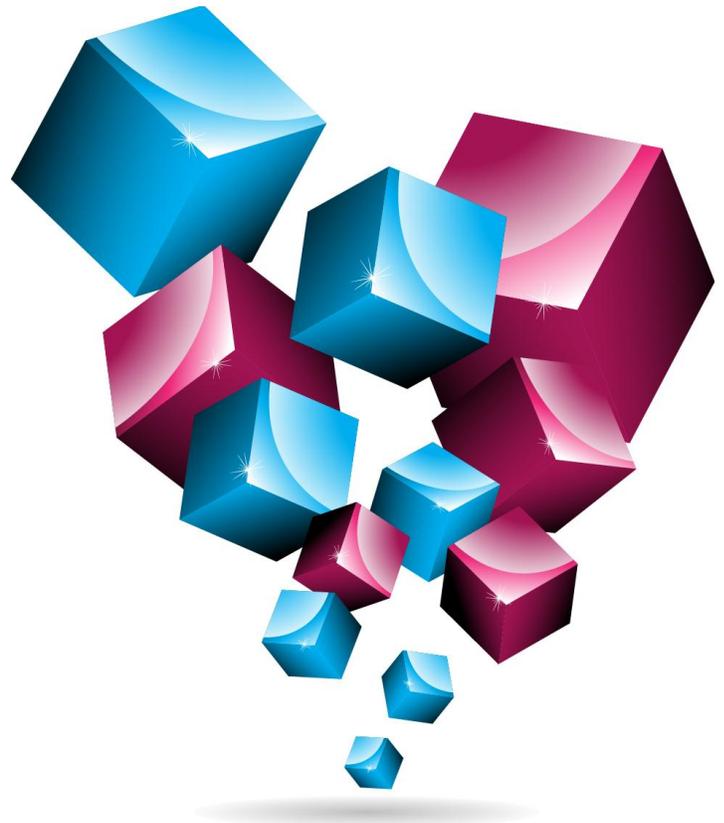
Mary Boone  
President, Boone Associates  
35 Pratt Street, Suite 104  
Essex, CT 06426  
Main office: 860-767-1675  
info@maryboone.com

## Abstract

This paper demonstrates how the Cynefin framework helps leaders (and other communicators) with sense making. The framework shows the difference between ordered and unordered organizational contexts and assists with sense making as it relates to one of four organizational domains: simple, complicated, complex and chaotic. Complex contexts call for new communication approaches and one of these approaches, the large group intervention, is discussed in detail.

In complex contexts, Large Group Interventions (Bunker and Alban, 2006) can serve as valuable communication approaches by providing enabling conditions for effective interactions between agents in a complex adaptive system (CAS). The principles guiding Large Group Interventions simultaneously impact organizational communication at an interpersonal level by creating more respectful interaction (Browning, 2007). The author shows how proper identification of context through the Cynefin framework (Kurtz and Snowden, 2003; Snowden and Boone, 2007) is critical to effective application of these complexity-based approaches.

An example of a large group intervention with the IT department of a large pharmaceutical company is explored. Client-consultant communication in this type of intervention is also examined.



## Full Paper

Over 20 years ago, I received a Master's Degree in Organizational Communication from The University of Texas at Austin. Thereafter, I embarked on an autodidactic path of cross-disciplinary studies and work experiences that culminated in the work described in this article. My work has been heavily informed by the fields of information technology (Meyer and Boone 1994; Boone 1993) and organizational development (Boone, 2001). In the past five years, in my work and research, I have applied principles of complexity science to leadership and organizational communication.

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article (Snowden and Boone, 2007), David Snowden and I describe a framework for helping leaders with decision making and sense making in organizations. In this paper, I extend that work to explore how that sense making framework relates to communication and, in particular, communication in conditions of complexity. Browning and Boudes (2005) have established the relationship between narrative and complexity and they compare the Cynefin sense making approach to that of Weick's. They note that "Communication under conditions of complexity takes the form of facts, ideas, theories, and ideologies that amalgamate into a narrative." Browning and Boudes also note that both Weick and Snowden affirm that *participation* is a critical component of a proper managerial response to complexity and discuss the fact that "letting go" while remaining involved is one of the hardest complexity responses for a manager to learn.

An assumption underlying the Cynefin framework is that organizations are Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). Browning, Shetler, and Boudes (in press) describe complex adaptive systems as having many autonomous parts (or "agents"); these agents can learn in response to local external changes, are attracted to others with similar responses, and self-organize. Browning, et. al. note that attraction and connectivity among agents enhances functioning of the CAS.

New approaches to leadership and communication are needed in complex adaptive systems (Snowden and Boone, 2007). Browning et. al. discuss how a manager's role resembles that of a facilitator in the context of what he calls KM<sub>2</sub>. "To fulfill this role, some managerial distance is necessary. Once a favorable context, consisting of enabling conditions, has been created by management, only light direction is indicated, allowing for self-organization among agents, attraction among sub-systems, and aggregation into groups of sub-systems, so that generative interaction can occur. This facilitative approach is contrary to the classical picture of the manager who plans, organizes and controls." While Browning is discussing this managerial role with regard to the

movement of knowledge, the same approach to leadership is required in other conditions of complexity.

In this paper, I build on these ideas and focus on how large group interventions can serve as effective communication approaches for leaders who are working in conditions of organizational complexity. These approaches simultaneously serve as a wellspring of information for leaders (which assists with the pattern recognition that is so important to sense making in conditions of complexity), a positive communication experience for both leaders and participants in terms of creating respectful interaction, and as a method for teaching leaders how to let go and remain involved.



## Complexity and the Cynefin Framework

The Cynefin framework is based upon principles of complexity science. Cynefin (pronounced ku-*nev*-in) is a Welsh word that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that influence us in ways we can never understand. It is useful in helping leaders understand the contexts in which they are operating.

The five contexts described in the framework are defined by the nature of the relationship between cause and effect. Four of these – simple, complicated, complex and chaotic – require leaders to diagnose situations and to act and communicate in contextually appropriate ways. The fifth – disorder – applies when it is unclear which of the other four contexts is predominant. The complex domain is much more prevalent in the business world than most leaders realize and requires different, often counter-intuitive responses.

### Simple Contexts

Simple contexts are characterized by stability and clear cause-and-effect relationships that are easily discernible by everyone. Often, the right answer is self-evident and undisputed. Simple contexts, properly assessed, require straightforward responses. Directives are clear, delegation is easy, and functions are automated or outsourced. The role of the leader in simple contexts is to sense, categorize and respond. Extensive communication among managers and employees is not usually required because disagreement about what needs to be done is rare. A top-down approach to communication in this context is efficient and, as a rule, well-accepted.

## Communication Approaches in Simple Contexts

Top down communication is common and appropriate in simple contexts. Whether a leader is delivering a speech, writing a blog, distributing a policy, or sending an email, communication can, and often should be, one way. While there may be room for improvement in a simple process or circumstance, by and large, simple contexts are characterized by a lack of uncertainty and a correspondingly low need for interactive communication.

## Complicated Contexts

Complicated Contexts may contain multiple right answers and though there is a clear relationship between cause and effect, not everyone can see it. In a complicated context, leaders must sense, analyze and respond. This approach often requires the assistance of experts and calls for investigating several options – many of which may be excellent. The problem in complicated contexts is that high levels of expertise can often produce entrained thinking. In these situations, innovative suggestions by non-experts may be overlooked or dismissed. When communicating, the leader will need to listen to the experts while simultaneously welcoming novel thoughts and solutions from others.

## Communication Approaches in Complicated Contexts

In complicated contexts there are several communication implications to consider. In complicated contexts, experts can be consulted either individually or as a group and their ideas and opinions can be solicited for the consideration of the leader. However, regardless of which option is selected, it will be important for the leader to establish a channel of communication with people who can provide intelligent input to a situation but who are not experts in the field. The goal is to get a fresh perspective on expert advice.

## Chaotic Contexts

Chaotic contexts are characterized by virtually no relationship between cause and effect. No manageable patterns exist, only turbulence. In the chaotic domain, the leader's immediate job is not to discover patterns but to address the immediate crisis at hand. A leader must first act to establish order, then sense the absence or presence of stability, and do more of what's working and less of what's not and then finally work to transform the situation from chaos to complexity, where the identification of emerging patterns can both help prevent future crises and discern new opportunities.

Ironically, direct top down communication is most effective here (as in the simple context) because there is no time to ask for input – immediate action is required.

## Communication Approaches in Chaotic Circumstances

While channels for feedback are necessary in conditions of chaos, the broadcast channel is more important in chaotic contexts. The leader has to act, then sense and then respond. Taking action is in and of itself a form of communication. When people see whether or not the action worked, the communication will spread quickly. The idea is to get the problem back into the realm of complexity as quickly as possible so that people can be consulted for their ideas and opinions. But until the crisis is contained, the leader needs to tell people what to do and *quickly*.

## Complex Contexts

In a complex context there is no such thing as a “right” answer arrived at a priori. In this circumstance we can only understand things in retrospect. That is why, instead of attempting to set a course of action a priori and then impose it, leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself or emerge. Leaders need to probe first, then sense, and then respond. This more experimental mode of management is uncomfortable for many leaders who are accustomed to traditional top-down management styles. If a leader tries to over-control the organization they will preempt the opportunity for informative patterns to emerge. Leaders who try to impose order (or communicate top-down) in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable will succeed. Communication in a complex context is profoundly different from communication in other contexts.

## Communication Approaches in Complex Circumstances

Conditions of complexity in current organizations are forcing a reexamination of the role of organizational communication. Heretofore, most corporate communication or internal communication departments focused more on what we “tell” people as opposed to listening. Internal newsletters, memos, speeches and many other forms of communication are about telling people things (broadcasting) instead of asking them or listening to them. While the need for upward and lateral communication has been well understood for decades (Katz and Kahn, 1966), many executives have not been forced to initiate multi-directional communication because they have been operating primarily in ordered contexts. As the complexity of organizations increases, executives will have to rely more on *interactive* communication.

When leaders are faced with unordered contexts (the left side of the Cynefin framework (i.e. Complex and Chaotic contexts) they still tend to fall back on the broadcast communication approaches that are familiar to them instead of embracing more interactive approaches. In the simplest terms, leaders must learn to listen and engage a wide variety of stakeholders and they must do it on a very large scale. Some of the best tools for interacting within and across boundaries in an organization are large group methods.



Complexity calls for high levels of interactive communication between agents in a system so that instructive patterns can emerge for purposes of sense making. Interestingly, there have been for a number of year's methods that are aimed at improving the collaborative work of large groups. Variously called Large Group Methods or Large Group Interventions, many of these approaches are either intentionally or unintentionally modeled on principles of complexity. While the methods can be widely divergent, several environmental conditions are required to successfully implement a large group method (Boone, 2001):

- Clear objectives for outcomes from the interaction
- Support for candid discussions with no penalties for openness
- Sharing of power across organizational hierarchies and boundaries
- Participants must represent a good cross-section of stakeholders with a high level of diversity
- A large portion of the discussions need to take place in small groups (6-15 people)
- Facilitation of the event must be non-directive, allowing for a high degree of self-organization on the part of the group
- The structure and design of the event must support self-organization of discussions
- The physical environment will have a strong impact on the quality of the discussions. Tables, room size, portability of furniture, and room set up are all crucial to the way the discussions will take place.
- Scheduling of the event should include time for reflection, preferably overnight.

(This list was produced from anecdotal evidence based on the author's direct design and implementation experience with dozens of these events.)

When a group is allowed to self-organize for purposes of discussing critical issues under the conditions listed above, several outcomes are common. First, power relationships shift in a group. If the CEO has the same amount of power in a discussion that a janitor has, the impacts on group dynamics are profound. This definition of self-organizing is in keeping with Browning Green, Sitkin et al when they note that “consistent with Foucault (1977), power relationships can form that re-define how different individuals and elements interact with one another... In other words, new power relationships can emerge between different organizational elements; an inside/outside emerges and local power-blocks form as the constitutive effect of the blending of communication flows.”

My observations of group behavior in large group settings also support the work of Taylor (2001, p. 137) whose thesis is “that understanding emerges in the collective interactive processes of practically situated conversation.” Large group methods allow groups to exercise what Taylor calls “distributed intelligence.”

Large group methods also produce respectful interaction. Respectful interaction involves communication practices that are considerate, vulnerable and reinforcing (Browning 2007). The combination of allowing groups to self-organize into meaningful and purposeful conversations under conditions where the group has developed and agreed upon communication norms produces a high degree of respectful communication and (Wright and Ehnert, 2006), can improve sense making.

Large group methods bring multiple stakeholders together in egalitarian dialogues that are usually conducted face-to-face. In other words, these methods allow for polyvocality which builds trust and self-respect. “When people have a say in what is going on, they have a greater investment in outcomes.” (Browning, 2007). And Browning also underscores the importance of face-to-face contact in building respectful interaction and developing what Oliver and Roos (2003) call a “collective mind”. “Face-to-face is a structural dimension in that it requires a room, or some equivalent bounded space for individuals to feel each other’s presence as part of the emotion of the decision. (Browning, 2007)” Most large group methods are conducted in face-to-face settings although there have been some interesting experiments with online interactions. Further study should be done comparing these two approaches to large group interactions to determine the level of importance of face to face contact.

## **Application of a Large Group Intervention Method to a Complex Challenge**

An illustrative example of the use of large group methods to address a complex challenge comes from a large pharmaceutical company.

This company's IT department was facing numerous problems. They were perceived as lacking in responsiveness, there was a good deal of political infighting taking place, and the department was seen as stodgy and lacking in innovative approaches to business challenges and opportunities. While some leaders would have seen this as a call to cracking down on their organizations, the leader of this particular department knew that much of the answer would be contained in the distributed intelligence of the group. Therefore, he agreed to the use of a large group method, Open Space (Owen, 1997), to tap into the group's understanding of the underlying problems and opportunities faced by the organization.

The method was applied in a local facility in the form of a meeting of the entire IT organization (a skeletal crew was left behind to address emergencies). Attendance was voluntary, and the invitation to attend the event was anonymous. Invitees were told very little about the event except that it would be focused around the following theme: "What are the issues and opportunities associated with our building a world-class IT organization?" The leadership team of the organization was carefully briefed prior to the event and each was told that they would be considered as being "just another participant." They were instructed not to unduly influence conversations and told that the facilitator of the event would use humor at the outset of the event to establish that the leaders were not "in charge" for the duration of the event.

When participants arrived at the meeting, they walked into a room that had no tables, only a circle of chairs. After a brief introduction by the facilitator (an outside consultant) to the concept and principles of Open Space, the group was left to its own devices in self-organizing into discussions that related to the theme identified above. Logistical considerations such as location grids and an established approach to posting of discussion sub-topics allowed for enough structure to prevent the discussions from being chaotic, while not influencing them. An interesting concept called "The Law of Two Feet" served as the mechanism for establishing communication norms. Participants were told that if they were not contributing to or getting anything out of a discussion or if someone was trying to control the discussion too heavily, they should simply "use their two feet" to find another conversation that was more interesting to them. (This "law" consistently has the effect of cutting down on negative communication behavior in small group discussions because the people participating in these discussions know that if they try to take over the discussions they will end up speaking to a room of empty seats.) Each person who initiated a discussion on a sub-topic (i.e. a topic related to the meeting theme) was responsible for two things: starting the discussion and taking notes to be turned

in at the conclusion of a discussion. No one was required to attend any of the sessions and people could leave discussions whenever they wished.

The outcomes were that the group identified 78 specific issues that could be addressed to help the group operate more effectively as an organization. Some of these things were within the power of the group to change and others required leadership actions. In a debriefing at the end of the session with the entire group, by far the most frequent comment from participants was that the discussions were extremely respectful, constructive, and productive.

The 78 issues identified by the group served as the foundation for a large-scale change effort within the organization including a reorganization of the department. The leader of the group noted that the acceptance of the change was greatly increased over previous efforts and he attributed this high level of acceptance to the fact that the group was instrumental in charting a course for what needed to be altered.

Over the course of the past 20 years, I have used numerous large group methods (and frequently developed my own) in similar situations. The parallels with CAS are clear: certain boundary conditions must be established (i.e. articulating a theme, setting ground rules, establishing a specific physical environment) and then agents (people) are allowed to self-organize to address a challenge or opportunity. Leadership intervention does not take place until after the event and it is informed by the information provided by the group.

## **Consultant/Client Communication in the Application of Large Group Methods**

The client/consultant relationship in applying large group methods is pivotal. Leaders must be taught about the value of self-organization and the importance of sharing power. Consultants must exhibit a high degree of integrity in getting commitment from leaders that they will act upon the information provided by the group. As Browning and Boudes (2005) noted, teaching leaders to “let go” is very difficult. The consultant can use the application of large group methods as a highly effective teaching method for leaders to learn about letting go in conditions of complexity. Once they are convinced that whatever problem or opportunity that is facing them is too complex for them to solve alone, they begin to understand how the input from the group can be valuable in identifying emergent patterns that the leader can use to determine appropriate actions.



Sense making in organizations is becoming increasingly challenging at all levels as conditions of complexity increase. The Cynefin framework serves as a means of helping leaders to identify appropriate responses to organizational conditions across different contexts. Large group interventions create respectful interaction, generate narratives that provide emergent patterns for sense making and decision making, and provide a context for leaders to learn how to communicate and lead in complex contexts. The interactions that take place in large group events provide an environment for agents to interact and self-organize as part of a complex adaptive system.

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## About the Author

Mary Boone, founder of *MaryBoone.com* and president of Boone Associates is a leading authority on high performance collaboration and engagement. Her work as a keynote speaker, educator, thought leader and published author has received widespread acclaim. Among those quoting from and praising Mary's work are Tom Peters, *The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, *CNN*, *The Financial Times*, *Chief Executive Magazine*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *CNBC*, *Information Week*, *CIO Magazine*, and *Industry Week*. The *Harvard Business Review* article she co-authored with David Snowden entitled "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making" won the Emerald Citation Award in 2011 which is awarded to the top 50 articles from the top 300 management publications worldwide that have proven impact since their publication date, and in 2008, they won an Academy of Management award for the same article. Mary's books include *Managing Inter@ctively: Executing Strategy, Improving Communication and Creating a Knowledge-Sharing Culture*. (McGraw-Hill) and *The Information Edge* (co-authored with N. Dean Meyer, Dow Jones). Another of her books, *Leadership and the Computer* (Prima Publishing), was selected as "required reading" for Congress by Newt Gingrich when he was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.