



## CYNEFIN

(Extract from the article “Complex acts of knowing” by D.Snowden)

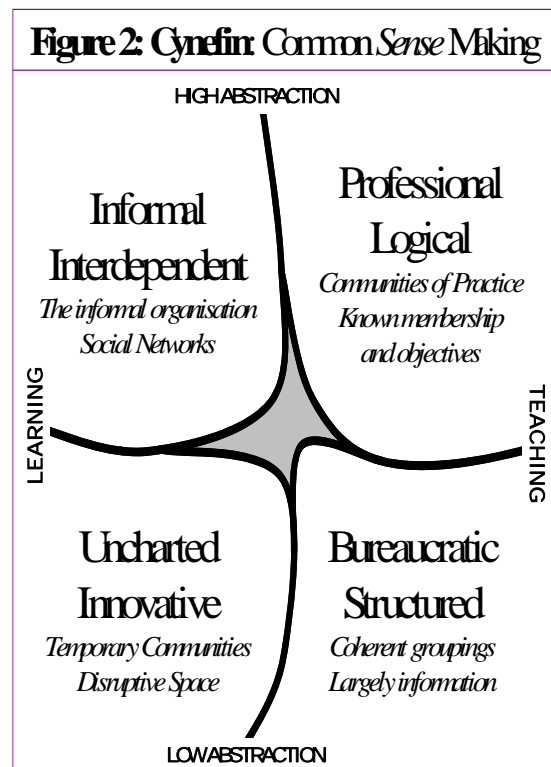
**Cynefin** (pronounced kun-ev’in) is a Welsh word with no direct equivalent in English. As a noun it is translated as *habitat*, as an adjective *acquainted* or *familiar*. Cynefin creates four open spaces or domains of knowledge all of which have validity within different contexts. They are domains not quadrants as they create boundaries within a centre of focus, but they do not pretend to fully encompass all possibilities. The fifth central space has significance, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

### ***Bureaucratic/Structured: teaching, low abstraction***

This is the formal organisation, the realm of company policy, procedures and controls. It is a training environment. Its language is known, explicit and open. It is the legitimate domain of the corporate intranet and its shared context is the lowest common denominator of its target audience’s shared context.

### ***Professional /Logical: teaching, high abstraction***

Commonly professional individuals, who through defined training programmes, acquire a specialist terminology; codified in textbooks. The high level of abstraction is teachable given the necessary time, intelligence and opportunity. This is one of the most important domains as knowledge communication is at its most efficient due to the high level of abstraction; in second generation thinking this is the domain of communities of practice



### ***Informal/Interdependent: Learning, high abstraction***

In this domain we have the abstraction of shared experiences, values and beliefs. This is the domain of the shadow or informal organisation, that complex network of obligations, experiences and mutual commitments without which an organisation could not survive. Trust in this domain is a naturally occurring phenomenon as all collaboration is voluntary in nature. Examinations of primitive symbolic or pictorial languages reveal some relevant facts. Primary of among these is the ability of symbolic languages to convey a large amount of knowledge or information in a very succinct way. Each symbol has a different meaning according to the combination of symbols that preceded it. The problem is that such languages are difficult to comprehend and near impossible to use unless you grow up in the community of symbol users. In some primitive societies the symbols are stories, often unique to a particular family who train their children to act as human repositories of complex stories that contain the wisdom of the tribe.



The ability to convey high levels of complexity through story lies in the highly abstract nature of the symbol associations in the observer's mind when s/he hears the story. It triggers ideas, concepts, values and beliefs at an emotional and intellectual level simultaneously. A critical mass of such anecdotal material from a cohesive community can be used to identify and codify simple rules and values that underlie the reality of that organisation's culture. At its simplest manifestation this can be a coded reference to past experience. "You're doing a Margi" may be praise or blame – without context the phrase is meaningless, with context a dense set of experiences is communicated in a simple form. Is the common understanding of the symbol structure and its sequence that provides shared context in this domain

### ***Uncharted/Innovative: Learning, low abstraction***

We now reach a domain in which we have neither the experience, not the expertise because the situation is new, the ultimate learning environment. The organisation will tend to look at such problems through the filters of past experience. The history of business is littered with companies who failed to realise that the world had changed. In hindsight such foolishness is easy to identify, but at the time the dominant language and belief systems of the organisation concerned make it far from obvious. This is particularly true where the cost of knowledge creation within the organisation is high as this tends to knowledge hoarding and secrecy that in turn can blind the organisation to new and changed circumstances. Other organisations deliberately share knowledge, depending on speed of exploitation as the means of maintaining competitive advantage. Here we act to create context to enables action, through individuals or communities who have either developed specific understanding, or who are comfortable in conditions of extreme uncertainty. Such individuals or communities impose patterns on chaos to make it both comprehensible and manageable