

The Archetype PM Mindset Can Quickly Turn Chaos Into Disaster

Most project and program managers bring a certain professional and ethical point of view to their work. In fact, the Defense Acquisition University maintains statistics on the Meyers-Briggs profiles of the program managers who come there for training. Meyers-Briggs defines four general attributes of personal behavior (extrovert-introvert; thinking-feeling; sensing-perceiving; intuiting-judging]. The permutation of those factors yields 16 possible different preference sets. In 2010 the track record was an astounding 87 percent match on just one of these 16 possibilities (ITSJ)! This personality type, when not consciously making choices (which usually means "when things get hairy", values facts over opinions, logic over feelings, and doing what is right over what feels good.

What that means is that governance professionals have a remarkably common view of how things should be — one that is quite different from the wide range of attitudes shared by the other 93 percent.

The downside of this value focus is that there is a temptation to see those who do not share their priorities as lacking in values. This only reinforces the unfortunate fact that we all have difficulty relating to people who see the world through different lenses.

People are seldom truly irrational. Generally, they act very rationally in their own self-interest. If it appears irrational, that is because they operate within value systems and respond to perceived threats that are completely foreign to your own value system.

Now let's see what happens when we apply this value-divergence to an organization that is somewhat challenged in define or sticking to its own value system.

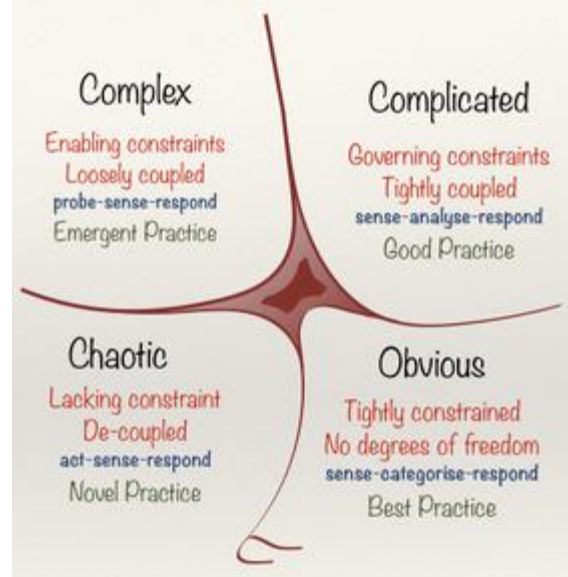
David Snowden's Cynefin theory¹ explains what happens next.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

The model shows four basic conditions that may exist in an organization. When the condition is known, the appropriate response is fairly clear.

There is also what I would call a non-condition, "disorder", in which it is not clear to anyone what the situation really is. Under that circumstance, people revert to their natural tendencies.

Here's where Snowden's work takes on supreme relevance: the boundary between obvious and chaotic is catastrophic: applying an obvious solution to a situation that is actually chaotic will quickly drive that system to complete breakdown, and vice-versa.



[Image credit](#)²

Setting aside whole industries that are really all about skunkworks-style innovation and the most creative companies in more traditional industries, in general a properly-functioning organization is a very stable system handling operations that have been rendered rather routine through processes. That is not accidental: it is precisely what organizations have been set up to do for over two hundred years. They turn their core business activities into carefully planned and monitored processes, optimized for the best possible performance in a competitive world. It is what we call "bureaucracy" in its best sense. When things are working well, most organizations present "obvious" situations. Categorize the situation, select the appropriate response. Next, please.

When we sneer at "bureaucracy", it is actually because we are getting inept service, delayed delivery or illogical answers: in other words, we are not getting the things that bureaucracy is supposed to optimize. That happens because the organization's processes either broke down or never existed. Either temporarily or permanently, the organization has become process-averse.

One of the hallmarks of a process-averse organization is that nobody really does know what is going on. In other words, it is almost by definition disorderly. People do what comes naturally because they do not know what else to do.

Some people (the ones we used to call "type A") are all about taking action. Any action will do. They do not seem to grasp that most situations are driven by a cause-effect relationship. For them the world is just a never-ending series of emergencies. People operate in an act-sense-respond cycle in which each event requires a new invention and discovery process. People like this turn an orderly situation into

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

disorder, in which nobody knows what is going on, by applying their chaotic approaches to known situations.

Those of you familiar with "cowboy" IT operations, in which nothing works properly and people run around all day taking random actions to fix problems and in the process making them worse. That's a great example of a chaotic response being applied to something that is actually a pretty well-defined problem, and as we have all experienced, the result is ... well, chaotic!

The thing is, they like it that way. Freedom of action and hero status whenever they do manage to put out one of the fires that they set. They are not going to be happy about being confined to orderly processes.

Many employees like working in organizational settings because they provide a nice, stable environment. These folks do see the "obvious" situation that the bureaucracy was intended to provide. Everybody knows where to go and what to do. It doesn't matter why. As long as the paychecks don't bounce, why ask why? Obviously, these people are not going to be big fans of change. Following Snowden's model, when the chaos monkeys invade this nice "obvious" world, as far as these people are concerned the entire system has just collapsed. These dependent people are not going to solve the problem. They're hunkered down behind their desks, hoping that the crisis will pass, waiting for someone to fix the problem and tell them what to do next.

Now into this somewhat toxic mix comes the traditional governance manager with a set of professional practices that provide the canned response to any situation. Armed with that perspective, the program manager sees the situation as "obvious," simply requiring the application of best practices. Technically speaking, the situation actually is obvious, or at least it was until the business processes fell apart. Now it is not. Now the organization is acting in a chaotic manner, and as we now know, trying to apply obvious solutions (do this process) will fail miserably in a situation where processes have been thrown out of the window.

When you step back from the problem a bit one sees that the situation is no longer obvious because the cowboys have thrown it into disarray. Yet it is not legitimately chaotic, because the problem space is fairly well known, as is the ultimate solution. Our real challenge is figuring out how to get the organization to absorb the medicine it needs.

In the Cynefin model, the Complicated quadrant is for situations where we know how to respond correctly if we can just work out which of several scenarios is actually being presented. In that case, our effort is on figuring out the situation. It is like a doctor's visit: if they can diagnose the problem, they can look up the right medication. The skill is in the diagnosis.

In our situation, we do pretty much know what the problem is. What we do not know is how to get the organization to swallow the medicine. That's the complex quadrant, in which we push a little here, push a little there, see what is working, and move to capitalize on successes. That is not what the Simmer system is, now that I have it worked out, but it is certainly the way in which the Simmer system evolved.