

THE ART OF LEADING IN COMPLEXITY

HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERS NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY, TRUST, AND CHANGE

BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC, PCC

In today's business environment, leaders are increasingly asked to operate in conditions where certainty is scarce, stakes are high, and familiar approaches no longer reliably produce desired results. Leading well in these conditions is less a matter of applying the right answers and more a matter of discernment – the capacity to sense what is required now, to navigate uncertainty with others, and to act in ways that strengthen trust and coherence over time.

You lead to enhance the resilience, productivity, and health of your organization. Doing so requires knowing when to share power and when to wield it alone, when to look to the wisdom of the group and when to take your own counsel. You may be called upon to act against your instincts. Under pressure, even highly capable leaders may revert to habits that once worked well but now constrain learning and adaptation. How do you best address issues with varying levels of uncertainty and adapt with creative solutions?

This paper explores the art of leading in complexity: how effective leaders read context, navigate uncertainty, and build trust while guiding meaningful change. It offers a practical way to distinguish between different kinds of challenges leaders face – and to respond in ways that support resilience, coherence, and sustained effectiveness.

Leadership Resilience in Conditions of Uncertainty

Facing a pile-up of change or uncertainty, what will maximize your leadership and organizational resilience? When leaders address complex issues with systemic awareness and skill, they significantly increase their own capacity and that of their team or organization to be more resilient, adaptive, and coherent in the face of the unknown.

Complex situations and decisions often arise with some major change – e.g., a bad quarter, a shift in management, a merger or acquisition – that introduces new qualities of unpredictability and flux. Information management alone is not sufficient. While access to data supports decision-making, it does not ensure good judgment when conditions are volatile or ambiguous. In situations of uncertainty and flux, you need **knowledge development** and access. **Complex issues** are the most difficult to deal with, yet they are increasingly the most **pivotal** in determining whether a project or organization will succeed or fail.

Leadership challenges often arise not from lack of competence, but from applying approaches that fit one context to situations that require a different response. Leader “recipes” arising from crisis management related to routine, complicated or chaotic issues unfortunately can actually block effective decision-making and desired improvement.

A deep understanding of context, the ability to embrace complexity and paradox, and a willingness to flexibly change leadership style will be required for leaders who want to make things happen in a time of increasing uncertainty.

— A Leader's Framework for Decision Making

How will you avoid or navigate that mess?



COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE

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What Type of Situation is This?

Adapting requires more than technical skill. Leaders must develop *contextual intelligence* – the capacity to read situations and respond with discernment. The same leadership intervention behaves very differently depending on how the system is structured and how its elements relate. Effective leadership depends less on having the “right answer” and more on accurately reading the system and responding appropriately.

Research on adult development suggests that complexity does not only challenge our organizations – it challenges *how leaders make meaning*. Under pressure, leaders naturally rely on habits of thinking and action that may have served them well in the past, reverting to familiar habits of certainty, control, or simplification. These habits may be useful in what can be understood as routine (simple) or complicated situations. However, in complex situations where learning, adaptation, and collective sense-making are required, these same habits become liabilities. The same action that produces success in one context can generate resistance, brittleness, or unintended adverse consequences in another.

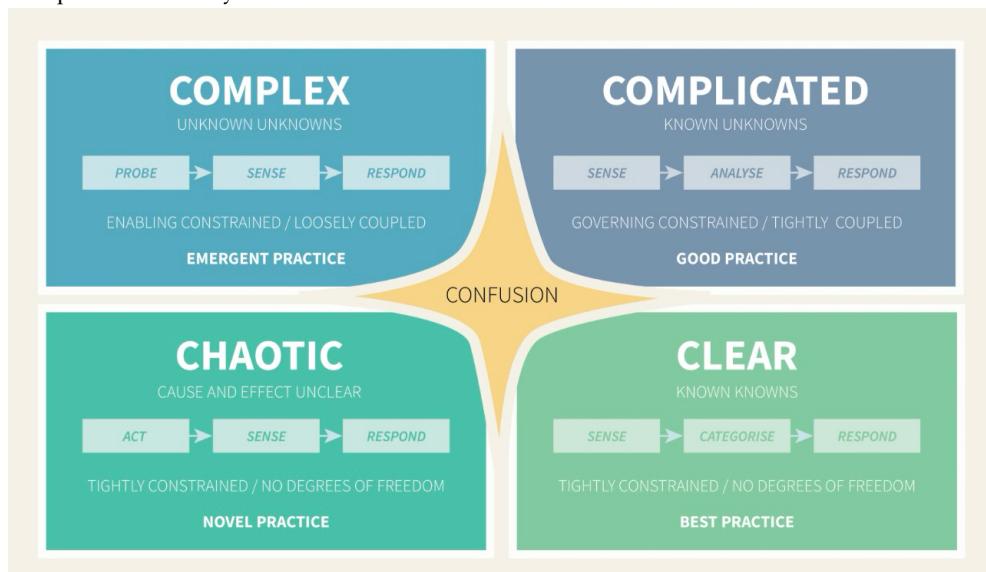
Discerning what kind of situation you are in is a core leadership task. Complexity science and knowledge management research show that it is highly useful to distinguish between *different types of situations* leaders and organizations face. Routine (simple), complicated, complex, and chaotic issues or situations differ not only in degree but in kind. Each type calls for a *different leadership goal and a different mode of action*.

How to Read the System You Lead

The Cynefin Framework, developed by Dave Snowden and colleagues, is a *sense-making model* that helps leaders *diagnose what kind of situation they are in* and respond appropriately. Its value lies not in prescribing best practices, but in *preventing the wrong practices from being applied in the wrong context* – a common source of leadership breakdown in complex environments.

The “art” of this approach lies in discernment rather than prescription – the practiced ability to read context, work with uncertainty, and act in ways that build trust and coherence over time. It is a relational and developmental practice, shaped through lived experience and reflection, and guided by care for the human and systemic consequences of leadership choices—especially when clarity is incomplete and outcomes cannot be guaranteed.

Here is a basic depiction of the Cynefin Framework:



The Four Leadership Contexts – and the Art They Require

These four leadership contexts offer insight for identifying the appropriate goal and choosing an appropriate approach. The CLEAR and COMPLICATED domains are characterized by lower uncertainty and higher predictability, where the goal is to *solve the problem*. The COMPLEX and CHAOTIC domains are characterized by higher uncertainty and lower predictability, where the goals shift to *improving a situation* or *stabilizing a system*.

CLEAR / ROUTINE – Best Practice

Leadership emphasizes consistency, standards, and reliability, while remaining alert to early signals of change. (“Follow the rule.”)

- *Cause-and-effect* relationships are clear, stable, and widely shared
- *Predictability* is high and *uncertainty* is low
- *Key variables* are known and accessible within the system
- The *goal* is to *solve* problems efficiently and consistently; function in *best practice*.

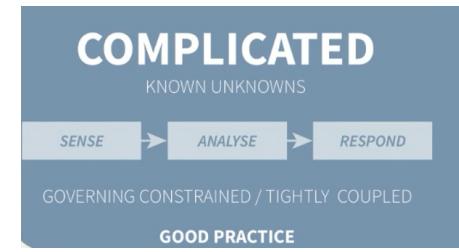


The *leadership approach* is *Sense → Categorize → Respond*. You set standards, ensure compliance, and optimize. Examples include safety procedures and routine operations. Appropriate tools include checklists, standard operating procedures, and automation. *Contractual trust* is essential, including clarity, reliability, and follow-through. A *systemic risk* is complacency; you oversimplify or miss early signals when conditions change.

COMPLICATED – Good Practice

Leadership integrates expertise and analysis with sound judgement and dialogue. (“Find the right answer.”)

- *Cause-and-effect* relationships exist but are not immediately obvious
- *Predictability* is high and *uncertainty* is low
- *Key variables* are not known within the system but are knowable with outside expertise and analysis
- The *goal* is to *solve* problems correctly; function in *good practice*.



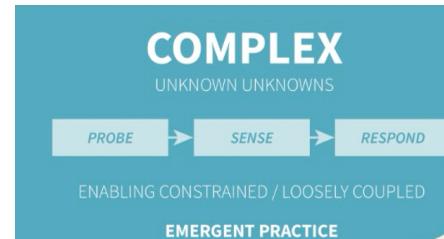
Complicated situations tend to be episodic. Uncertainty is mitigated by assurance that with time and acquired expertise, the problem can be solved. Once solved, the complicated situation ideally shifts to a clear or routine one as staff develops knowledge and practice.

The *leadership approach* is *Sense → Analyze → Respond*. You consult experts, compare options, and decide; in addition, you integrate expertise and translate insight. Examples include engineering tradeoffs and legal interpretation. Appropriate tools include expert analysis, good practice, scenario comparison. *Competence trust* is essential, including confidence in expertise and judgment. A *systemic risk* is analysis paralysis or expert overreach; this can also be experienced as expert silos, disengagement from non-experts, and hierarchy replacing dialogue.

COMPLEX – Emergent Practice

Leadership creates conditions for learning, experimentation, and shared sense-making. (“Run experiments and learn.”)

- *Cause-and-effect* relationships may exist but cannot be predicted in advance
- *Predictability* is low and *uncertainty* is high
- *Key variables and relationships* are constantly shifting; patterns only become visible in retrospect
- The *goal* is to *improve* the condition or position of the organization; cultivate *emergent practice*.



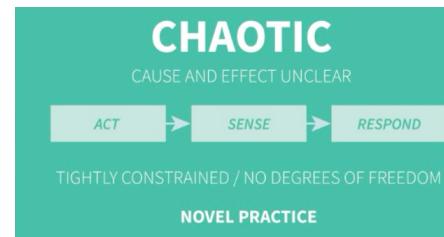
Complex situations tend to be chronic. This is the domain of culture, trust, strategy, and most meaningful organizational change. Even with high levels of uncertainty and many variables out of your control, you still need to make and implement decisions. You must access the intrinsic, collective resourcefulness of the system, bound by systemic principles. Indeed, experts and hierarchy can block improvement. This is where *most leadership breakdowns occur* – because leaders apply clear or complicated logic to a complex reality.

The *leadership approach* is *Probe → Sense → Respond*. You enable learning, host experiments and pilots, review for emergent patterns, amplify what works, and course-correct together. Examples include culture change, strategy in volatile markets, and trust repair. Appropriate tools include safe-to-fail experiments, short feedback loops, narrative sensing. *Relational and learning-based trust* are essential, including confidence that people can experiment, risk, learn, and adapt together. A *systemic risk* is forcing certainty or premature convergence; this can also be experienced as over-control or importing “best practices” that suppress emergence and related innovation.

CHAOTIC – Novel Practice

Leadership acts decisively to stabilize the system, then intentionally releases control. (“Act now to stabilize.”)

- The system is unstable and in crisis; no meaningful *cause-and-effect* relationships are discernible
- *Predictability* is low and *uncertainty* is high
- *Key variables and relationships* are not knowable and constantly changing
- The *goal* is to *restabilize* the system sufficiently to move into complexity and learning; adapt with *novel practice*.



Chaotic situations tend to be episodic. Even with high levels of uncertainty and many variables out of your control, you still need to make and implement decisions. To stabilize the system, you apply rules and constraint, observe how variables respond, adjust and repeat.

The *leadership approach* is described as *Act → Sense → Respond*. You act decisively and as the system stabilizes shift from control mode into the coherence mode of complexity. Examples include crises, disasters, and sudden breakdowns. Appropriate tools include rapid action, command-and-control (temporarily), and containment. *Stabilizing trust* is essential, including confidence that leadership will act decisively without blame. A *systemic risk* is remaining in command-and-control or authoritarian mode longer than necessary.

CONFUSION / DISORDER

Confusion or disorder reveal whether leaders can pause, inquire, and re-orient together under pressure. The leadership task is diagnosis before action.

- **Confusion** is a state in which there is **no meaningful shared agreement** about what kind of situation is being faced; it is not a 5th type of problem.
- **Confusion or disorder** are often sustained not only by structural ambiguity but by unexamined thinking habits.



In confusion or disorder, different leaders believe they are in different domains (clear, complicated, complex, chaotic). Applying the leadership logic they most trust, power, habit, or urgency replace sense-making and progress stalls. In the absence of shared understanding, leaders may default to simplifying narratives, expert certainty, premature agreement, or control – not because this is effective but because these habits **reduce anxiety** in uncertain conditions.

The **leadership approach** is **Diagnosis Before Action**. In a situation of fragmented perspectives and conflict about “what is going on,” you slow the rush to action, restore shared understanding by surfacing assumptions, decomposing the issue, and restoring shared understanding. This restores coherence without forcing false agreement. Examples include leadership teams talking past each other. **Communication trust** is essential, including confidence that leadership will act with good purpose and timely candor. A **systemic risk** is defaulting to personal preference or power, losing sight of interdependencies and a larger purpose.

Real-time diagnostic questions for leaders include:

- What kind of situation are we actually in?
- Where do we disagree about the nature of the problem?
- Are we applying certainty where learning is required?
- What kind of trust is most needed now?
- Who is not being heard – and what might they see or say?
- What would increase coherence across this system?

What Leading in Complexity Actually Requires

When operating in the **complex domain**, effective leadership looks fundamentally different from traditional directive or competence-based models. Leaders shift from control to conditions, from answers to experimentation, from certainty to curiosity and coherence, from heroic leadership to coordinating collective intelligence.

Practical signals you will likely experience in the **complex** domain include:

- Experts disagree—and all have plausible arguments
- Interventions have unintended consequences
- What worked before no longer works reliably
- Emotional, relational, or cultural dynamics matter as much as technical ones
- The system “pushes back” when over-managed

When you see these signals, **best practice is not best practice**.

Context determines the right leadership move. Trust determines whether that move will work. Complexity requires willingness and the presence of mind and self to make critically different, sometimes counterintuitive moves.

- From control → conditions
Leaders stop trying to control outcomes and instead shape the conditions under which better outcomes can emerge.
- From answers → experiments
Rather than asking “What’s the right solution?”, leaders ask, “What small, safe-to-fail experiments could teach us something useful – quickly?”
- From certainty → coherence
Progress is measured not by predictability, but by:
 - increasing shared understanding
 - faster learning cycles
 - growing trust and alignment
- From hero leadership → collective intelligence
The leader becomes a convener of sense-making, not the source of truth.

Good leadership requires openness to change on an individual level. Truly adept leaders will know not only how to identify the context they’re working in at any given time but also how to change their behavior and their decisions to match that context.

They also prepare their organizations to understand the different contexts and the conditions for transition between them.

Many leaders lead effectively – though usually in only one or two domains (not in all of them) and few, if any, prepare their organizations for diverse contexts.

– A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making

The art of leading complexity is essentially leading from a *systems perspective*. Experience shows that this is not only a technical or relational challenge; it is also a *developmental one*. It requires leaders to grow their capacity to stay present, curious, and reflective when certainty is elusive or unavailable – and to help others do the same.

Systemic leadership is guided by principles that support learning, coherence, and trust across contexts, namely:

- Diversity of perspective
- Egalitarian engagement
- Candor, trust, and transparency
- Focus on relationships and interactive patterns
- Designing for time and learning
- Holistic imagination and clarity of higher purpose.

Consider this as a concrete before/after contrast:

Before, everything requires executive approval; best practices are enforced everywhere; alignment is demanded early; and (shared) learning happens only after failure.

After, some decisions are standardized while others are experimental; leaders name uncertainty explicitly; teams know when to comply and when to learn; (shared) learning is continuous.

What do effective or mature leaders do differently? First, they *diagnose context before acting*. Second, they *shift their leadership style* as conditions change. Third, they know when to *control*, when to *analyze*, when to *experiment*, and when to *act*. Finally, they *design organizations that can operate across contexts*.

Context-capable organizations are designed for navigation rather than predictability. They enable authority and learning to move with the problem. In practical terms, that means building enough structural and cultural flexibility so different parts of the organization can respond differently to different kinds of situations – with minimal confusion or conflict.

Designing for operation across contexts, leaders do six things differently:

- Differentiate decision rights by context
- Build multiple speeds into the organization
- Create safe-to-fail space for learning
- Make sense-making a shared responsibility
- Design authority to be fluid, not fixed
- Invest in leaders’ inner capacity, not just skills.

The Art of Leading Where You Are

In conclusion, the “art” of leading in complexity lies in discernment rather than prescription. It is the ability to read context, sense what is emerging, and choose actions that are proportionate, timely, and trust-building.

How could this matter where you are?

This artistry is relational, developmental, and ethical in nature. It is oriented toward fulfilling purpose and creating value for an interrelated community of stakeholders. It is cultivated through experience, reflection, and learning in real systems. Leaders express this art through embodied capacity and willingness to work with emergence. They attend to human dynamics and act with care for both immediate and long-term systemic consequences – particularly when no single right answer exists and leadership is exercised in service of the broader community.

For Additional Reading

This work draws primarily on complexity science and sense-making research (notably the Cynefin framework articulated by David Snowden and colleagues), systemic leadership and team coaching, trust dynamics, and adult development perspectives on leading in complexity, including the work of Jennifer Garvey Berger.

On complexity and sense-making

- Snowden, D. & Boone, M. *A Leader's Framework for Decision Making* (Harvard Business Review)
- Snowden, D. *Cynefin: Weaving Sense-Making into the Fabric of Our World*

On adult development and leadership in complexity

- Garvey Berger, J. *Simple Habits for Complex Times*
- Garvey Berger, J. *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps*
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. *Immunity to Change*

On trust dynamics

- Reina, D. & Reina, M. *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace*

On systemic leadership and teams

- Hawkins, P. *Leadership Team Coaching*
- Senge, P. *The Fifth Discipline*
- Strozzi-Heckler, R. *The Leadership Dojo*

About the Author

Beata C. Lewis, JD, MSC, PCC is an executive coach and systems practitioner with over 25 years of experience partnering with senior leaders and leadership teams navigating complexity, uncertainty, and meaningful change. Her work integrates complexity science, systemic team coaching, somatic and relational leadership practices, and adult development to help leaders cultivate discernment, strengthen trust, and build coherence across stakeholder systems. Beata’s work emphasizes leadership as a practiced, relational discipline—humane, effective, and responsive—serving both organizational effectiveness and the broader human systems in which leaders operate. Known for her grounded presence, compassion, and pragmatic insight, Beata supports leaders at pivotal moments to act with clarity, care, wisdom, and ethical responsibility, especially when no single right answer exists.