CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Adaptive and Complexity Approaches

Heifetz · Snowden · Stacey

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A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

The foundational models assume a known destination. This paper covers the traditions that drop that assumption – change where the answer is not yet known, cannot be planned in advance, and must be discovered through the change itself. The question: how do you lead change when there is no settled end-state to manage toward?

Three related moves run through this camp. Heifetz separates problems that expertise can solve from those that require people to change. Snowden matches the response to the causal nature of the situation. Stacey goes furthest, arguing that organisational futures emerge from local interaction and cannot be controlled or designed at all.

Ronald Heifetz b. 1951

Adaptive leadership · Harvard Kennedy School

CORE THESIS

The central error in change is treating an **adaptive challenge** as a **technical problem**. Technical problems are solved by applying known expertise; adaptive challenges require people to change their values, beliefs and behaviours – to learn. Leadership is the activity of mobilising people to do that adaptive work, and it is distinct from authority.

FRAMEWORK

Dimension	Technical problem	Adaptive challenge
Definition	Clear	Requires learning to define
Solution	Known; held by experts	Requires learning; held by the people
Primary work	Applying expertise	Changing hearts, minds, behaviour
Locus	The authority / expert	The people with the problem

The practice of adaptive leadership then turns on a handful of moves:

Move	Purpose
Get on the balcony	Step back from the action to see patterns
Regulate distress	Hold tension in a productive zone – not too little, not too much
Give the work back	Resist solving it for people; make them own the adaptive work

METHODOLOGY

Case-based leadership scholarship and teaching, grounded in political and organisational practice, particularly in public and civic settings.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Reframed change leadership around learning and the productive use of tension, and gave practitioners a sharp, usable distinction. The critique is that the concepts resist measurement and operationalisation, and that “adaptive” can become a label for any hard problem.

Dave Snowden b. 1954

Complexity and sense-making · the Cynefin framework

CORE THESIS

The right way to act depends on the **causal nature of the context**, and confusing one context for another is a leading cause of failure. Cynefin sorts situations into domains, each with its own decision logic. Crucially, **complex** problems are not merely complicated: cause and effect are only clear in hindsight, so they must be **probed** with safe-to-fail experiments, not planned.

FRAMEWORK

Domain	Nature of causation	Right response
Clear	Obvious, known	Sense – categorise – respond (best practice)
Complicated	Knowable via expertise	Sense – analyse – respond (good practice)
Complex	Emergent; clear only in hindsight	Probe – sense – respond (safe-to-fail)
Chaotic	No discernible cause and effect	Act – sense – respond (stabilise first)
Confusion	Unclear which domain applies	Break down until domains are clear

METHODOLOGY

Complexity science combined with narrative and anthropological sense-making methods — what Snowden calls naturalising sense-making — developed originally in a corporate research setting.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Widely adopted for navigating uncertainty, and valuable for separating ordered from unordered systems. The critique: assigning a situation to a domain can be subjective, the framework is often applied more loosely than intended, and formal empirical validation is limited.

Ralph Stacey 1942–2021

Complexity and organisations · complex responsive processes

CORE THESIS

Organisations are not systems to be designed but **complex responsive processes of relating** between people. The future emerges, unpredictably, from countless local interactions — which means managers cannot control or engineer organisational outcomes in the way most change models assume. Stacey turned this into a direct challenge to prescriptive change management itself.

FRAMEWORK

Zone (certainty × agreement)	Character and approach
Close to both	Simple: plan and control work well
Moderate distance	Complicated: political and judgemental, not merely technical
Far from both	Zone of complexity — the “edge” where novelty and creativity arise
Very far from both	Chaos: avoid; not a place to operate deliberately

METHODOLOGY

The complexity sciences applied to management, evolving into a process-relational sociology drawing on Mead and Elias. Note that Stacey later **repudiated** the certainty–agreement matrix bearing his name as too mechanistic – even as it remained his most-copied artefact.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A profound challenge to the controllability assumption underpinning almost every change model in the first paper. The critique is the mirror image of its strength: the mature work is abstract and deliberately offers few prescriptions, which practitioners find hard to act on.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

A note for the sceptical reader: the popular, boxed-up versions of these ideas often diverge from the underlying scholarship. The Cynefin domains are frequently applied as a static 2×2 rather than a dynamic sense-making tool, and the "Stacey Matrix" is still widely taught despite Stacey himself disowning it. Treat the frameworks here as lenses for judgement, not as validated instruments or decision rules.

Synthesis

Theorist	Core distinction	Framework	Stance on control
Heifetz	Technical vs adaptive	Adaptive leadership	Mobilise, don't solve
Snowden	Ordered vs complex contexts	Cynefin	Match method to context
Stacey	Designed vs emergent	Complex responsive processes	Outcomes cannot be controlled

FOR THE OPERATOR

This camp replaces the plan with the probe. For the operator: diagnose the problem before choosing a method – do not run a technical playbook at an adaptive challenge, or a scheduled rollout in a complex domain. Its limit is the flip side of its honesty: it is far stronger at diagnosis than prescription, and offers less to hold on to than the step models. The final paper returns to firmer ground – the individual, and implementation.