

## Cynefin

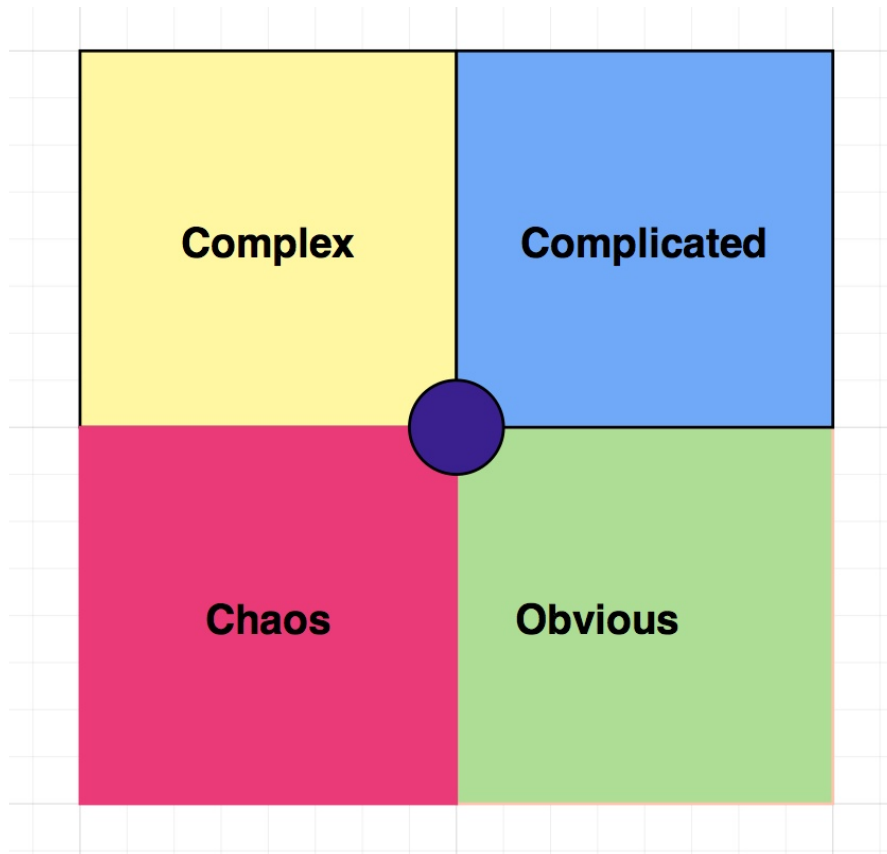
Sometimes it just seems harder that it ought to be. Why is it taking so long? Those of us who have been working in Tohoku for the last three years can sometimes get discouraged. It seems like everytime we take three steps forward, we take two steps back. Isn't there an easier way? Can't someone figure this out?

Recently I have found myself turning to the Cynefin<sup>1</sup> Framework to help me make sense of all of this. I'm not going to try to explain this framework fully. Please follow the footnote for more information if you interested. I do want to share how it is helpful for me in understanding our current realities.

The Cynefin Framework suggests that when we're doing our work in the world we find ourselves in four different kinds of situations:

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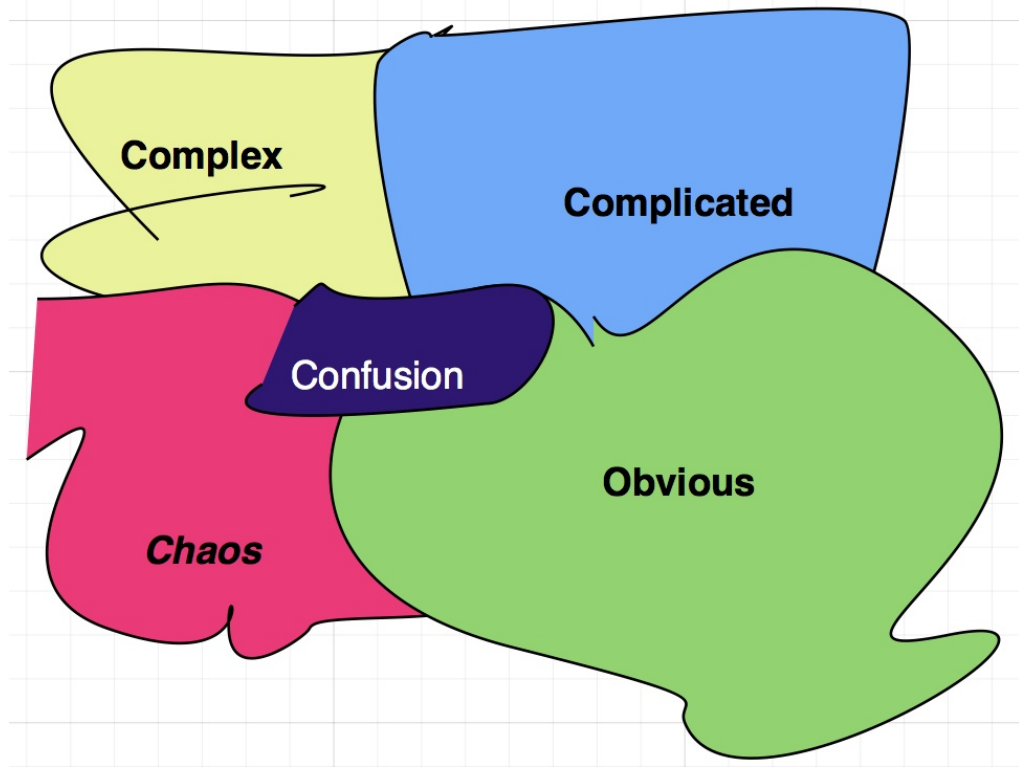
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These are not discreet, even categories and usually aspects of each are present in every situation. But I think it is helpful to think about them.

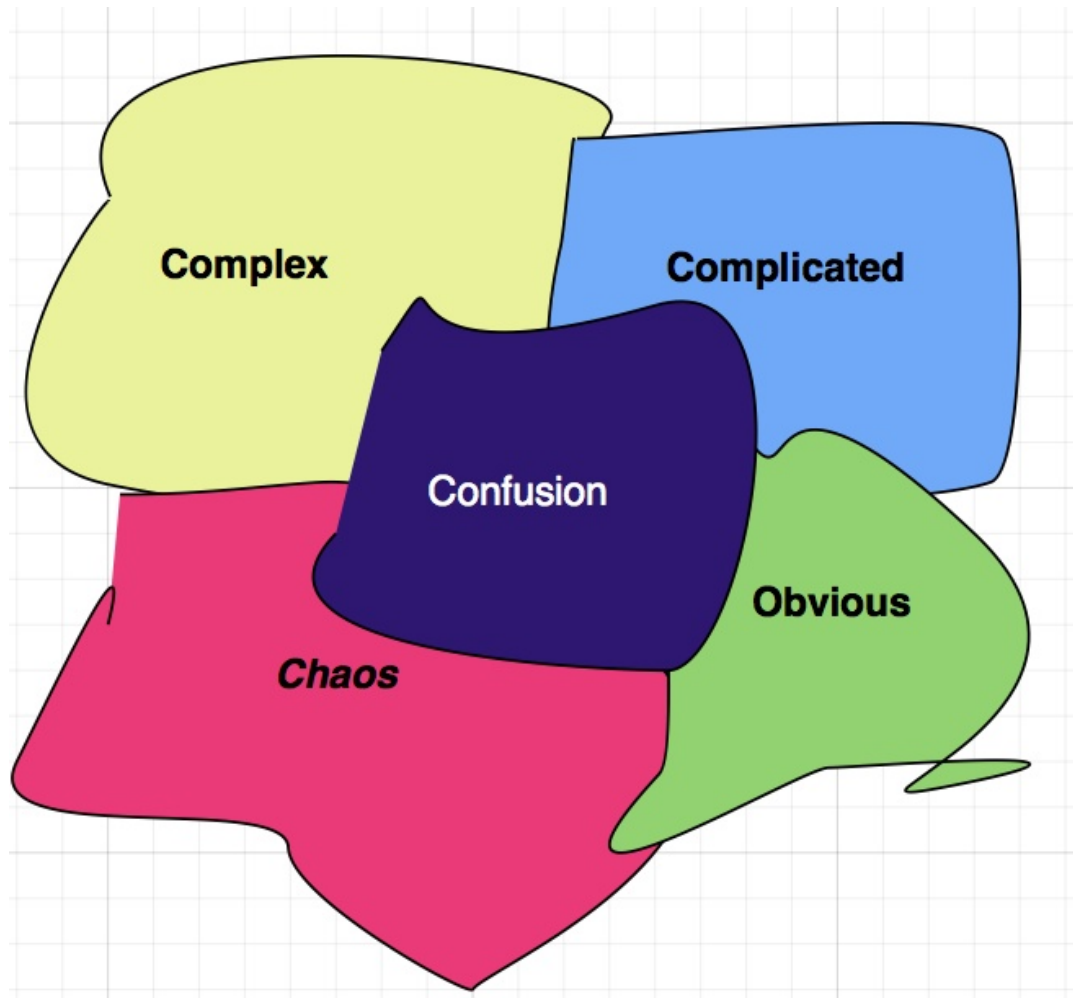
- In **obvious**, we know what to do. We just need to go ahead and do it.
- In **complicated**, it takes a little longer, but we can figure it out and get things done.
- In **complex**, we started to be confounded, not sure how to proceed
- In **chaos**, we're usually just overwhelmed, uncertain and unsure.
- The space in the middle is **confusion**. Where it all starts.

These five domains are different sizes. My own default state is to picture them like this:



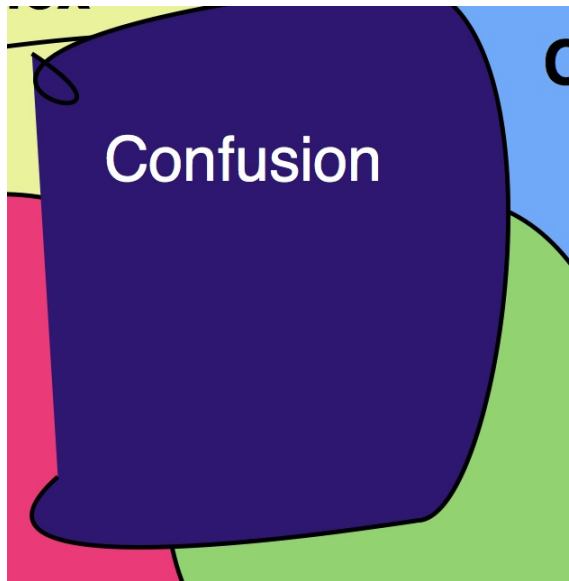
A lot is obvious and straight forward – let's get on with it. Some is complicated and will take a little more time. There's a little bit that's complex and then there are some things that are chaotic. Oh, and yes, there is still some confusion in the middle.

But when I pause, what I am able to see is that our world – especially our world in Tohoku – looks more like this:



Back in March and April of 2011, much of what we did was **obvious**. I **do not** in any way mean to say it was easy. It was heartbreakingly hard. But it was simple. Feed people. Shelter people. Find those missing. But then, in some ways, as the mess started to get cleaned up, things actually became more confusing!

The space in the middle is where we always must begin. I don't like confusion very much. Someone suggested to me once that most of us are much more comfortable with incorrect certainties than we are with uncertainty and confusion. BUT WE MUST BEGIN BY BEING IN OUR CONFUSION TOGETHER.



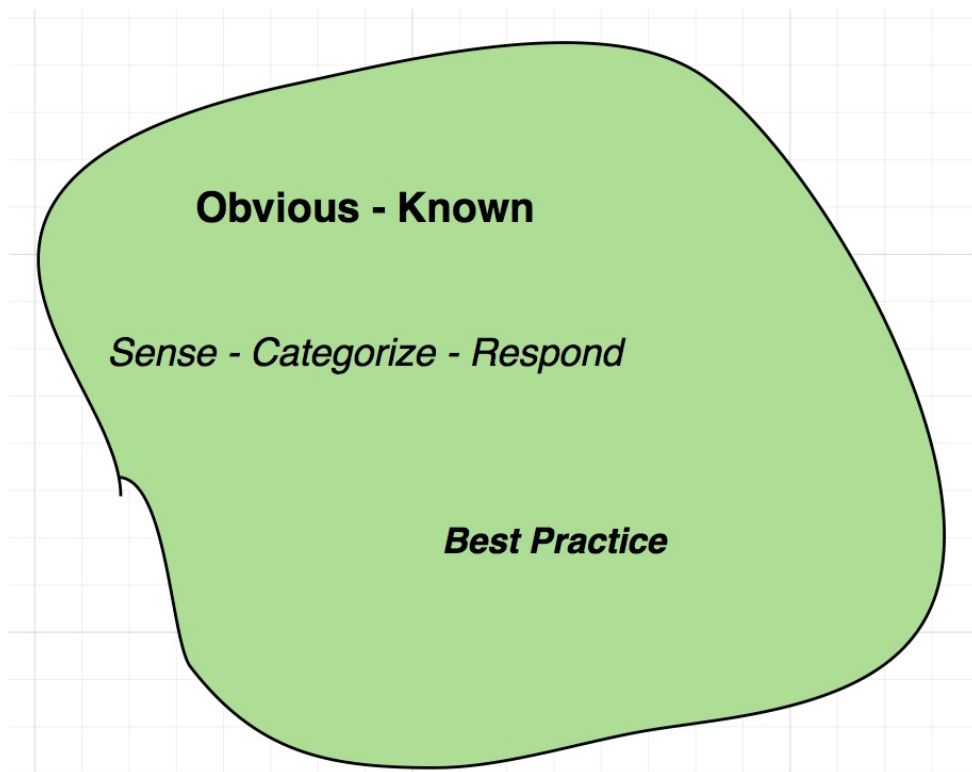
As I look back on the spring and summer and fall of 2011, mostly I spent time being with others in our confusion. It was so important to stay there! Especially, I think, as an American, I tend to look at a situation through the lens of the skills and experience I have and I want to act immediately. I want to ignore any confusion. But 3.11 was so confusing and overwhelming, even I had to stop, connect with others, and begin to find pathways forward. It is in places like this that I'm so thankful for Theory "U" and Presencing,<sup>2</sup> because it represents one way of opening myself to what is truly present in the whole system. Usually it's best to do this kind of presencing work together – which

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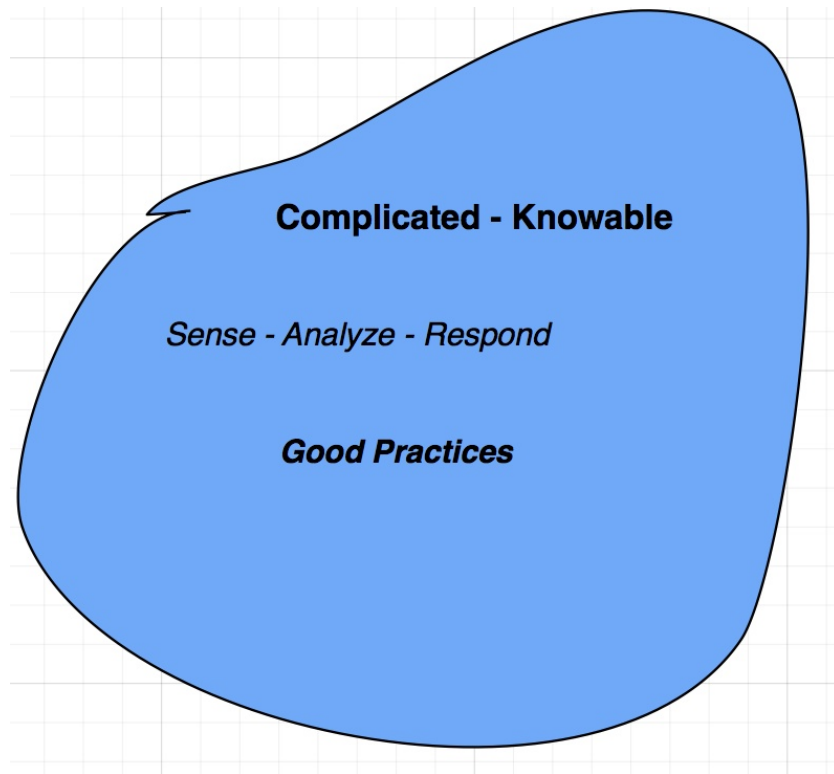
is where all my emphasis on dialog comes from. We sit together, sense together, and begin to realize which of these four domains helps us understand how to approach the work ahead.

We usually know what to do in **obvious** situations. We take a deep breath, look around, gather up our courage, think about where this problem fits, and get to work.



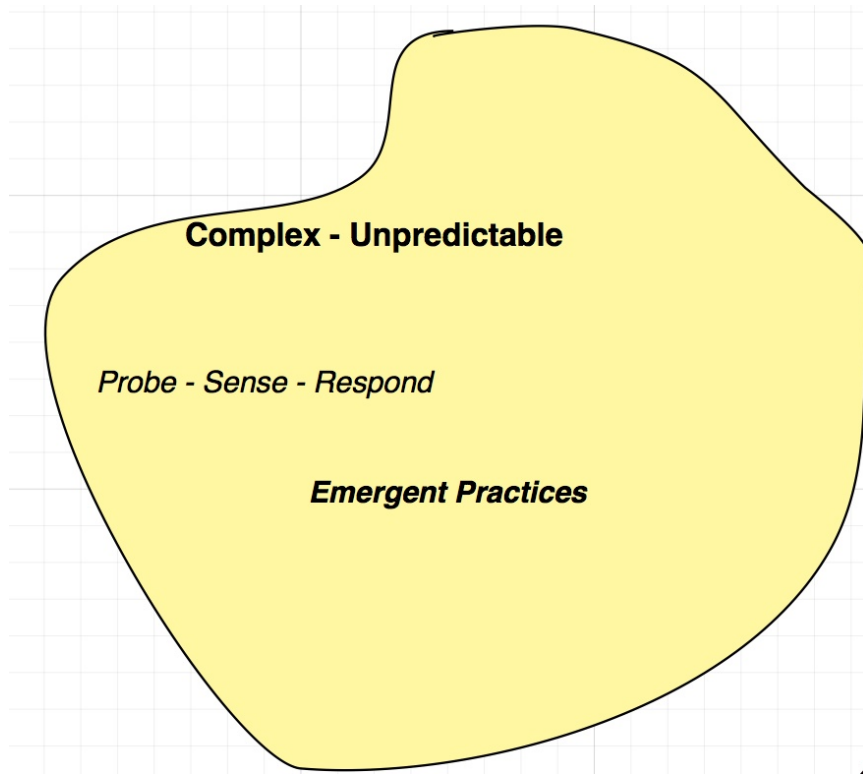
This is an area where “Best Practices” make sense. People have done these things before. We can learn directly from past experience and apply it. Hard work sometimes, but the way forward is pretty clear and we know in advance what obstacles we are likely to encounter. Let’s go!

**Complicated** is, well, a little more complicated.



The work required after emergency, rescue and stabilization was more **complicated**. Get the trains running. Get the debris cleaned up. Rebuild shops and services. We have to stop and think. We begin by sensing what we can about the situation and then we begin to analyze. Sometimes we need to ask for help from outside experts. Systems thinking, adaptive scenario planning, various means of categorizing and analyzing are all very helpful here. We may not know what to do in the beginning, but this is a domain of the knowable – we can figure it out. And while there usually isn't a single best practice for how to proceed, once we have analyzed the situation, there are often several different good practices, depending on the skills of those present in the system. We can get this done!

Now it gets more difficult. More daunting. We have moved to the **complex** and

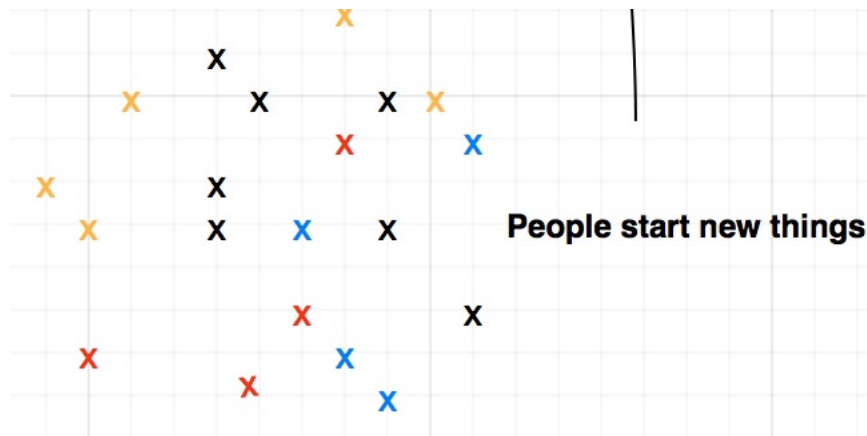


unpredictable. And indeed, this is the domain of much work in Tohoku today – especially if we are trying to create a new future.

In Japan and around the world and in our own minds, we keep asking – why can't we just get this done? Why does it feel, often, like we are almost frozen in place? It's is because everything in this domain is unpredictable. We are beyond the area of cause and effect. We like to think we live in a universe where when we do "A," the "B" happens. We like predictability. But that predictability doesn't exist in a complex world.

Since we don't know what will happen, we have to reach out and gently touch the system – try stuff – and watch to see what happens. We begin with a number of different experiments and watch for the results. Going back a little in this book, this is the territory





of early innovation where we are trying new things out to see what will make a difference.

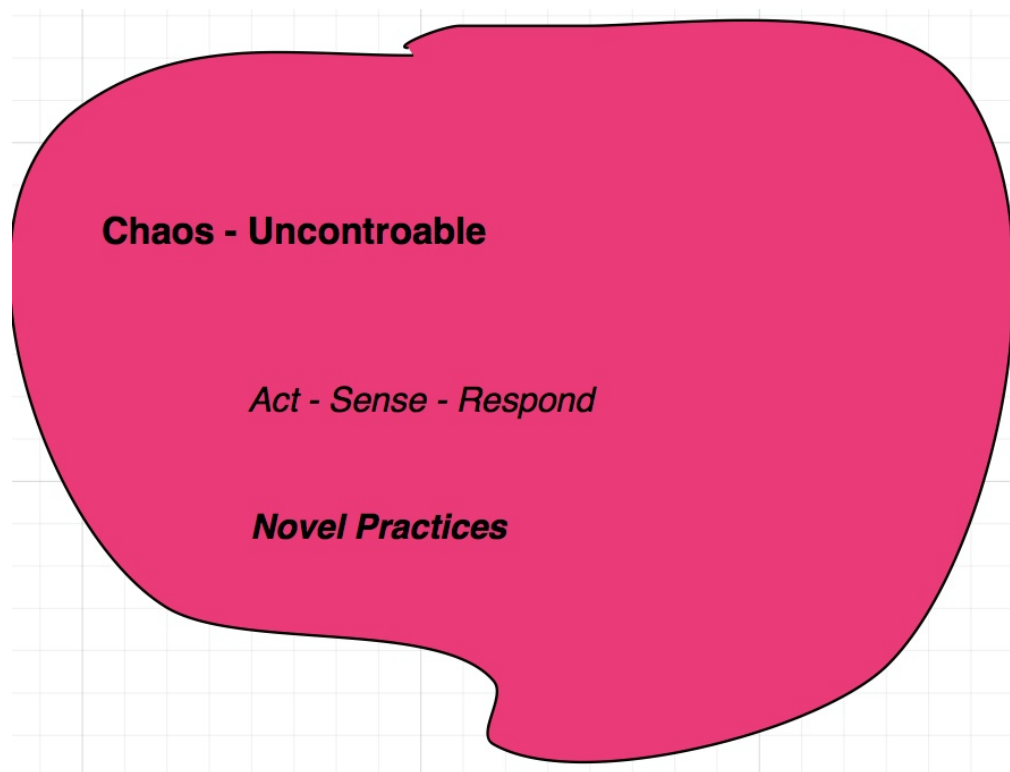
Remember, most of what we new doesn't work. But we keep trying. We know that something is needed. We connect with each other formally and informally and learn together. We act, pause, examine, reflect, learn and then act again. We begin to build some new practices – emergent practices – which help us move, eventually to building new systems and processes.

Reflection approaches like Theory "U" are helpful in this area – just as they are helpful in cutting through initial confusion. Learning how to evaluate our work in this area is essential, and there are few helpful tools. Transformative scenario planning helps us place our work in a larger context so we can discover more about the new story we are building. Prototyping is essential here as well.

But this is not an area of rapid response. Things are slow. It takes time to get anything done because we are learning as fast as we can. We have to learn how to hold urgency and patience at the same time. And it's hard. People all over the world

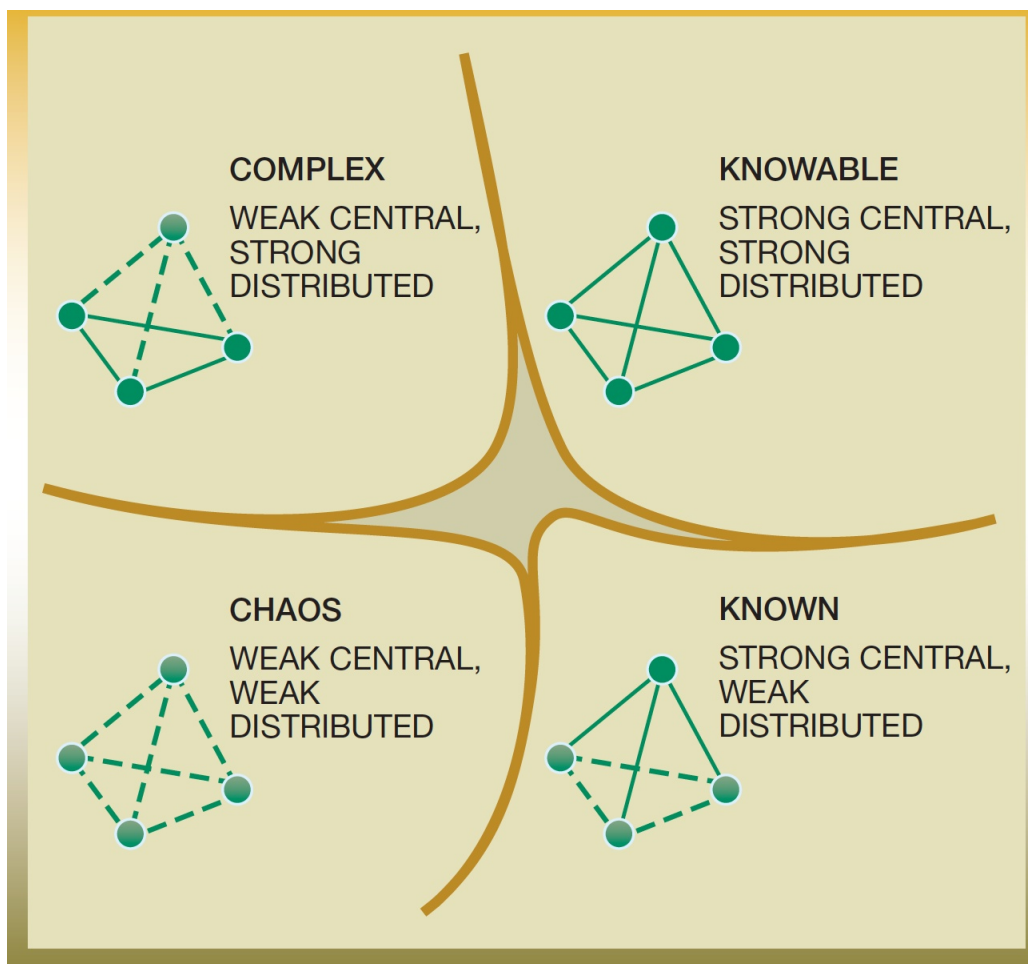
are quick to criticize Japanese government and TEPCO for not getting the many aspects of radiation under control more quickly. Many of the complaints are justified – AND we have to remember that the situation is enormously complex.

Finally we get to the area of **chaos**. Right after the disasters it was chaos and unfortunately parts of what is going on in terms of radiation in Fukushima is still in chaos.. So how do we act in chaos? We act. The situation is unknowable and uncontrollable. We move into action, unsure of ourselves. We do something and watch closely to see what happens. Some good things happen, some not so good. We increase our actions that cause good things to happen and decrease our actions that have led to unfortunate results. **Act-Sense-Respond**. We begin to develop new and novel practices for dealing with our current reality.



I'm not going to write a lot about the Cynefin framework. This just scratches the surface. It is so helpful for me just to pause, stay in my confusion and talk with others about which of these domains is home to a situation or issue we are confronting. It helps me know where to start.

There's one other aspect of this framework I also want to mention. It is about where there is strength to get something done. Not surprisingly, it is different in each of these four domains:



- When dealing with the obvious and known, it works to have someone at the top in charge – giving orders.

- When dealing with complicated and unknown, depending on what's being done, sometimes centralization of authority works, sometimes decentralization of authority works – it is situational.
- In complex situations, one of the worse things that can happen is that someone tries to be in charge and tell others what to do. It doesn't work. Small, agile teams deep in collective learning and action are needed.
- Finally, in chaos it is just a mess. Frankly nothing works. We learn as fast as we can in order to situation action in one of the other domains.

As with other tools and lenses I'm introducing – don't over think this. Use what helps and ignore the rest. It helps me remember what I already know – that all situations are not the same – and it helps me find a place to begin.