Reversal Theory Meets Cynefin: A New Frame for the Leadership of Complex and Changing Systems

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ABSTRACT

Two different phenomenological systems approach – Cynefin and the theory of psychological reversals – have been used to explore leadership and change behaviours in a variety of settings over the last forty years. This paper combines them and explores the consequence of doing so for leaders faced with threats, challenges or change. The paper suggests a five-step approach to using these two sense-making frameworks when engaged in change. When combined, these two frameworks provide insights and practical and timely responses to complex and challenging situations. Given the growing complexity and rapid change that leaders face, this new framework can produce the insights needed to enable effective responses to threats, challenges and change.

Keywords: Cynefin, telic-paratelic, conformist-negativist, mastery-sympathy, auto-centric-allocentric, reversals, meta-motivation, change, transformation

INTRODUCTION

It has become a cliché to say that the world is a volatile, uncertain, and complex place filled with ambiguities. It is also a fragile, anxiety-inducing, non-linear, and, for many, incomprehensible time. Regardless of whether we examine for-profit corporations, non-profits, governments, or other organizations, leaders struggle to help their colleagues make sense of the world in which they live and operate. To complicate matters, generational mindsets are altering the workplace's significance in the lives of workers, particularly for Generation Z, while new technology is transforming work as an activity. Leading and enabling are getting more challenging.

At the same time, leaders of firms, non-profits, and non-government organizations are among the most trusted figures to help people understand what is happening and navigate the world in which they operate (Edelman, 2025). While trust in news media, government spokespersons, and social media diminishes, trust in organizational leaders remains stable.

Many have been working on leading in complex systems for some time (Wheatley, 2006; Plowman et al., 2007; Reyes, 2022), and their focus has been on seeking to understand the way in which leaders seek to understand the dynamics of the complexities they see and experience and then how they chose to act to "make sense" of the situation and then lead their colleagues through it.

The Cynefin Framework

A particular example of this work, seeking to understand the underlying pattern of a complex situation and then navigate through it, was developed by Snowdon and Boone (2007) and reinforced by the earlier work of Kurtz and Snowdon (2003). Building on Senge (1990), Snowdon and his colleagues developed an understanding of four different conditions organizations may experience. They named their approach "Cynefin," using this Welsh word for place or home to describe the landscape and terrain of organizations undergoing change. Each of the four landscapes has a particular dynamic and experiential frame. They are shown in Table 1 below.

	Simple	**Complicated**	**Complex**	**Chaotic**
Cause-Effect	All can see cause-effect	Expert knowledge is needed to unpack cause-	Cause-effect will only be understood with	No relationship between cause-effect can be

		effect	hindsight	discerned
Key Leadership Tasks	sense-categorize-respond	sense – analyze – respond	probe – sense – respond	act – sense - respond
Focus on Leadership Actions	Best Practices	Good Practices	Emergent Practices	Novel Practice

Table 1: The Four Cynefin Frames

Several have explored the Cynefin framework in relation to health systems (Baker, 2021; van Beurden et al., 2013), education (Karlin et al., 2022), technical systems (Fierro et al., 2024) and public policy (French et al., 2009). It has been shown to be robust and helpful for leaders in terms of "sense-making" and guiding appropriate responses. Leaders find the elaboration of these frames, especially the leadership mistakes that occur from misreading a situation (e.g. seeing it as complicated when it is, in fact, complex), which Snowdon & Boone (2007) examined through storytelling.

A key component of this approach relates to three key sets of assumptions which need to be in place for the framework to be applied:

1. **The Assumption of Order** – Leaders need to recognize that "business as usual" always needs to be the subject of challenge. What may have been effective in the past may not be now and may not be the most effective response to threat, challenge or change. This is key to unlocking opportunities and responding to the challenges of complex and chaotic spaces, and it may also help in responding to the challenges and concerns associated with complicated spaces. Leadership thus becomes about constant prototyping of the "next" opportunity.

2. **The Assumption of Rational Choice** – There is always more than one way of thinking and understanding any situation. Suspending the idea that there is a straight, rational line between the challenge and its solution enables leaders to begin to listen and understand alternative perspectives and increase the range of possible responses to a situation. Rather than seeking to see a threat, challenge or change in "black and white" terms, leaders need to explore the paradoxical opportunities and use dialectical reasoning to make sense of their situation, especially if it is complex or chaotic.

3. **The Assumption of Intentional Capability**—When faced with an externally imposed change, rather than asking, "What did they intend and have in mind when they did this?" the leader needs to ask, "What does it mean for us now that this has happened? What is the opportunity of this present moment?" This thinking helps leaders engage, explore, examine, and innovate when others are "stuck" trying to understand why.

Undoing common assumptions and using a different narrative – changing the inner voice – makes a significant difference in the response to any emerging situation.

The Theory of Psychological Reversals

Also, from a base in Wales, slightly preceding Snowdon's work, emerged the theory of psychological reversals (Apter, 1982, 1989, 1992, 2001, 2005, 2018; Svebak & Murgatroyd, 1985; Apter, Fontana & Murgatroyd, 1985; Kerr, Murgatroyd & Apter, 1993). This theory is also grounded in systems thinking, though viewed through the lens of phenomenology (Apter, 1981).

Reversal Theory is a psychological framework that explores how individuals shift between opposing motivational states, known as meta-motivational states, to adapt to different situations. These states are organized into four pairs of domains: telic-paratenic (goal-oriented vs. playful), conformist-negativist (obedient vs. rebellious), mastery-sympathy (control-focused vs. care-focused), and aquatic-alloy (self-centered vs. other-

centred). The theory emphasizes the dynamic and reversible nature of human motivation, contrasting with static personality trait theories and trait-based theories of leadership (Apter, 2018). We show these states in Table 2 below.

Meta-motivational State Pair	Brief Description
Telic - Paratelic	Goal and long-term-oriented BS Sensation-seeking and playful
Conformist - Negativist	Rule following and obedient vs Rebellious and challenging
Mastery - Sympathy	Focused on control and "in charge" versus Connecting and Engaging with Others
Autocentric vs Allocentric	Self-centered versus Empathic and compassionate

Table 2: The Meta-Motivational States in Reversal Theory

The reversal theory proposition is that almost everyone switches between each of these pairs frequently, but they may display a regular pattern of meta-motivational states over time (i.e. their dominant or preferred state). They switch due to one or more of these reasons:

1. **Satiation**: Prolonged engagement in one meta-motivational state can lead to a sense of satiation, prompting a reversal to its opposite state (Apter, 1982; Apter, 2007).

2. **Frustration**: When an individual is unable to fulfill the motivational needs of their current state, frustration may occur, leading to a reversal as a coping mechanism (Apter, 1989).

3. **Contingent Events**: External situational changes or significant events can trigger a reversal. For example, an unexpected challenge might shift someone from a playful (paratelic) state to a serious (telic) state (Apter, 2001).

4. **Environmental Cues**: Shifts in the environment, such as changes in social context or task demands, can influence state reversals by aligning the individual's motivations with the new context (Apter, 2005).

For organizational leaders, Reversal Theory offers valuable insights into managing motivation, emotions, and adaptability within teams and across the organization. The key implications include:

- **Adaptability and Flexibility**: Leaders can use the theory to understand and respond to shifts in team members' motivational states, fostering an environment that adapts to changing needs and challenges. This also helps to identify individuals who have difficulty accessing some of the states, suggesting some learning and developmental needs.

- **Enhancing Team Dynamics**: By recognizing when employees are in different states (e.g., telic vs. paratelic, mastery vs sympathy), leaders can tailor their approach to encourage productivity or creativity as needed. Since effective communication is so vital in change management, this framework helps provide different lenses for different kinds of communication.

- **Conflict Resolution**: Understanding the conformist-negativist dynamic helps leaders address resistance or rebellion constructively, turning potential conflicts into opportunities for innovation, change and development.

- **Motivational Versatility**: Leaders can leverage the theory to create motivationally rich environments that align with diverse employee needs, improving engagement and performance.

The theory's emphasis on dynamic motivation is particularly relevant in modern workplaces characterized by complexity and rapid change. It enables leaders to adopt a systems-thinking approach and foster organizational resilience (Malik & Baloch, 2023). This is also the link made here to the Cynefin framework, which also sees

leaders as needing to be agile and adaptable when sensing a change in the narratives and experiences of those in the organization in which they work.

Mapping Meta motivational States to the Cynefin Domains

When we combine these two substantial bodies of knowledge and understanding, synergies and opportunities for leadership emerge. Both are grounded in phenomenology, systems thinking, and sense-frames. Both speak to changing team dynamics under different change conditions. Both explore the motivational dynamics of unfolding situations. They complement each other, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, which highlights the connection between meta-motivational states and the leadership activities that must be undertaken in each of the distinct Cynefin domains. The figure depicts the ideal motivational state for leaders in each Cynefin domain, along with the key tasks for leadership within that domain.

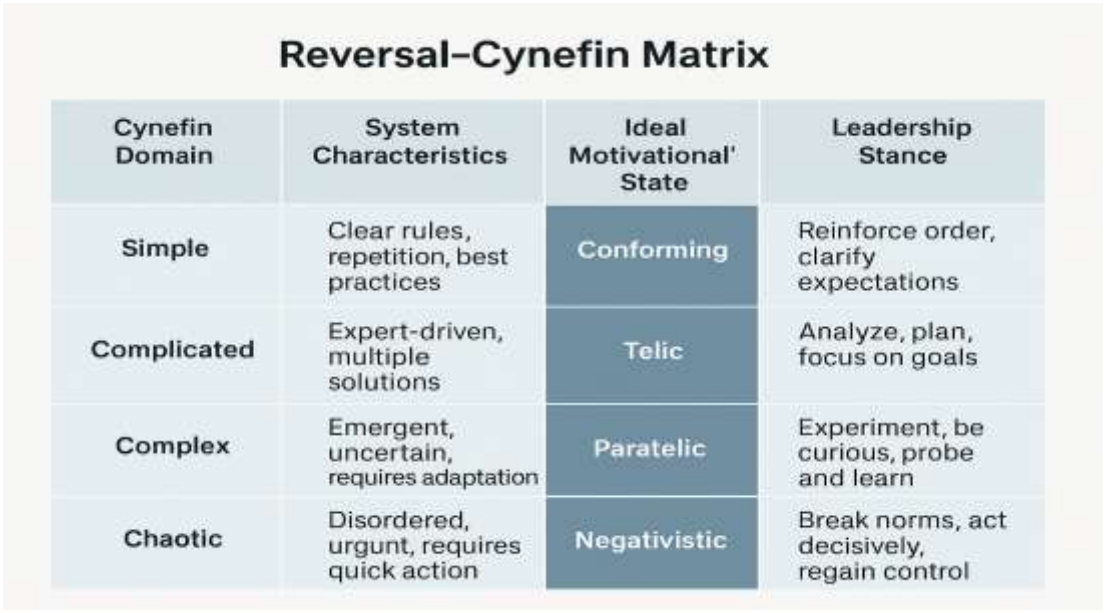

Figure 1: Cynefin Domains, Meta-Motivational States and the Work of Leaders

The synthesis of Cynefin and Reversal Theory creates a fundamentally new leadership paradigm that transcends the limitations of either framework alone. While Cynefin provides the contextual landscape for understanding situational complexity, Reversal Theory supplies the motivational mechanics that enable leaders to navigate these landscapes dynamically. This integration reveals that effective leadership in complex systems requires not just situational awareness, but motivational agility—the capacity to consciously shift between meta-motivational states as the Cynefin domain evolves. The phenomenological foundation shared by both theories creates a coherent whole where the leader's internal motivational reversals become the engine for adaptive sense-making, transforming static situational assessment into dynamic, responsive leadership action.

The true innovation of this integrated framework lies in recognizing that Cynefin domains and meta-motivational states exist in a continuous feedback relationship rather than simple correspondence. As leaders engage with complex situations, their motivational state reversals don't merely respond to the Cynefin context—they actively reshape how that context is perceived and navigated. For instance, a leader in a paratelic state may transform what appears to be a complicated situation into a complex one by introducing experimental approaches, while a leader stuck in telic conformity may reduce genuine complexity to false simplicity. This creates a leadership meta-skill: the ability to use intentional motivational reversals as tools for reframing situational complexity, essentially allowing leaders to move situations between Cynefin domains through conscious state management rather than being passive recipients of environmental conditions.

The synthesis generates what we term "emergent leadership intelligence"—a form of adaptive expertise where leaders develop the capacity to sense both the Cynefin domain and their optimal meta-motivational configuration simultaneously, then orchestrate reversals that align internal motivation with external complexity requirements.

This goes beyond the traditional notion of emotional intelligence to encompass motivational intelligence: the ability to recognize when current motivational states are misaligned with situational demands and to facilitate reversals not just in oneself but in team members. The unified framework suggests that the most effective leaders become "reversal architects"—individuals who can design experiences and interventions that naturally trigger appropriate motivational shifts in others while maintaining their own motivational flexibility. This creates a new form of systems leadership where the leader's primary tool becomes the conscious cultivation of motivational diversity and adaptive capacity across the organization, enabling collective navigation of increasingly complex and rapidly changing environments.

We show this in Figure 2 below, where the key dimensions of the two frameworks are integrated into a practice framework for leadership.

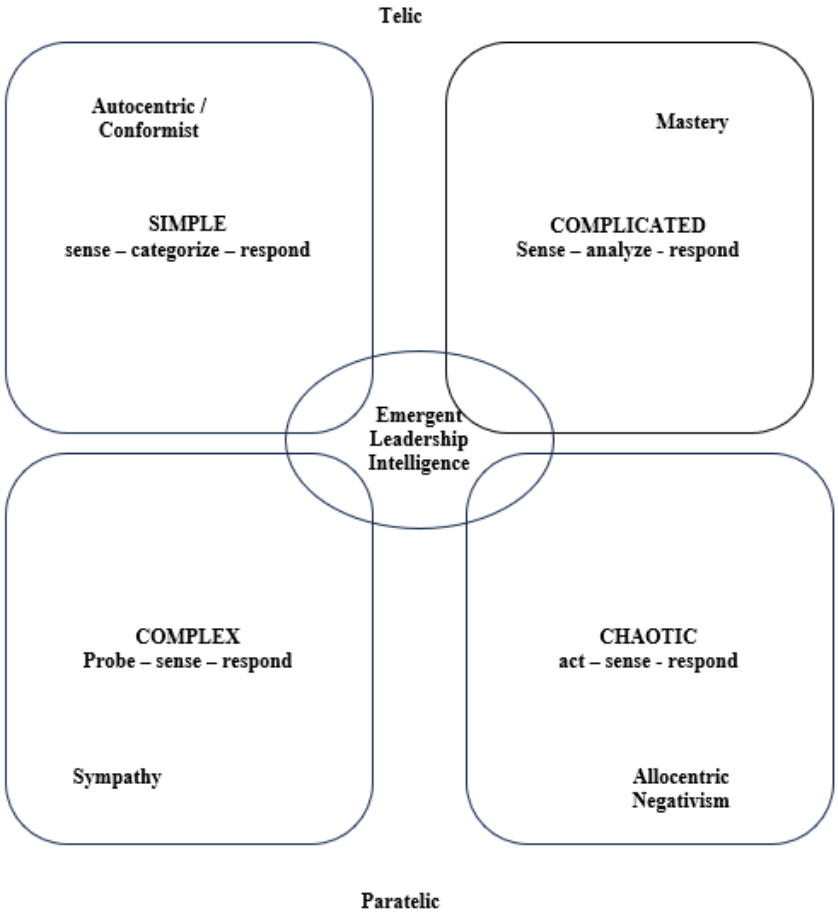

Figure 2 The Integrated Leadership Model of Cynefin and Reversal Theory

Turning This Connection into a Resource for Leaders

To leverage these insights, a five-step process has been developed that leaders can use to build their sense-making capacities. We describe these steps in Table 3, together with the value each step offers to the leader dealing with a situation and to their growth as leaders. These observations are derived from thirty years of consulting practice focused on organizational change and transformation in large and medium-sized enterprises.

Step 1: Diagnose the Situation	Is this situation: • A **simple situation** – apply best practice • A **complicated situation** – analyze and seek expert help • A **complex situation** – probe and seek to make sense, listening to a range of inputs

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="3">● A chaotic situation – act fact to diffuse tensions and start to experiment using design thinking and prototyping.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Step 2: Identify the Dominant Narrative</td><td>Statement Heard</td><td>State</td><td>Cynefin Domain</td></tr>
<tr><td>"Let's just follow the rules."
"We need expert input here."
"Let's try things and see what happens!"
"Everything is falling apart!"</td><td>Conforming
Telic
Paratelic
Negativistic</td><td>Simple
Complicated
Complex
Chaotic</td></tr>
<tr><td>Step 3: Check for Misalignment</td><td colspan="3">Common misalignment issues:
● Oversimplifying complex situations – the leader is stuck in the telic mode but needs to "switch" to paratelic to better engage with the situation
● Analysis paralysis in chaotic situations – avoiding negativistic response
● Compliance masking resistance – conforming without engagement
● Ignoring emergence, novelty, innovation – underuse of paratelic flexibility</td></tr>
<tr><td>Step 4: Enable Meta-Motivational Shifts</td><td colspan="3">● Conforming to Paratelic – Encourage serious play, experimentation, pilots, and skunk-works
● Telic to Paratelic – Suspend judgement, encourage parallel design works and prototyping
● Paratelic to Telic – Refocus with structure, clarity, deadlines and sound project management
● Negativistic to Conforming – Create shared rituals processes and normalize change – restate and keep focused on purpose
● Any State to Negativistic – Give space to challenge norms, encourage constructive dissent and improvisation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Step 5: Reflect and recalibrate</td><td colspan="3">Ask yourself these reflective questions:
● What is my current combination of meta-motivational states (see Table 2)?
● Are these the states I need to be in right now?</td></tr>
</table>

	• How are these states shaping how I lead and how others interact with me? • Where do reversals need to occur for me (and for others)? What can I do to enable this to happen? • What is the opportunity in the paradox, disruption, and change we are engaged in for me to strengthen my abilities and leverage my meta-motivational states?

Table 3: A Five-Step Process for Reflection and Action using Cynefin with Reversal Theory

A Case Study

A 700-bed hospital is hit by ransomware during peak hours. EHR access fails, interfaces go down, and patient safety risks rise. Leadership uses Cynefin to diagnose the decision context at each phase and Reversal Theory to deliberately shift motivational states to fit the context.

Phase 1: Chaotic (0–8 hours) — act–sense–respond

- **Leadership actions**: Immediate containment: Segment network, cut VPN, isolate identity services; switch to manual medication/labs; prioritize ICU/ED/OR. Communication and safety: High-frequency unit huddles, runner/radio protocols, manual incident/safety log, family updates.
- **Reversal Theory alignment**: Telic–mastery for decisive command, micro-closures (clear priorities, time-boxed orders). Sympathy–alloic to sustain trust and reduce distress at the bedside. Brief, bounded negativist to bypass normal change controls for rapid isolation.
- **Why it works:** Prevents analysis paralysis; stabilizes faster while protecting patients (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Phase 2: Complex (8–48 hours) — probe–sense–respond

- **Leadership actions**: Parallel safe-to-fail probes: read-only EHR for ICU, secure fax bridges for radiology, paper-to-digital reconciliation cells, shadow CPOE in one ward. Select probes that reduce staff cognitive load; use tight safety fences, kill-switches, and learning objectives.
- **Reversal Theory alignment**: Paratelic for experimentation; legitimized negativist for constructive challenge to legacy norms. Sympathy–alloic to center patient/staff burden in probe selection.
- **Why it works:** Accelerates discovery of workable interim workflows without premature "best practice" lock-in (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).

Phase 3: Complicated (Days 2–7) — sense–analyze–respond

- **Leadership actions**: Expert-led restores: identity rebuild, credential rotation, segmented cutovers, vendor forensics; CAB-like governance, validation scripts, rollback criteria. Scheduled "red windows" to test assumptions before cutovers.
- **Reversal Theory alignment**: Telic–conformist–mastery for disciplined execution. Time-boxed paratelic checks to avoid brittle integration.
- **Why it works:** Balances rigor with guarded adaptability; reduces rework and secondary downtime.

Phase 4: Clear (Weeks 3–6) — sense–categorize–respond

- **Leadership actions:** Institutionalize learning: revised SOPs, MFA/least privilege, dormant account sweeps, network segmentation, offline immutable backups, extended log retention, downtime drills,

crisis comms playbooks.

- **Reversal Theory alignment:** Conformist–mastery for reliability; periodic paratelic drills to deter complacency.

- **Why it works**: Sustains resilience and recovery speed in future incidents (Apter, 2018).

Leadership operating system: Throughout these events, each segment of activity involved leaders making explicit the cadence and rationale for their actions in terms of the frames offered in Figure 2. This leads to faster stabilization in chaos, smarter discovery in complexity, safer restores in complicated work, and stronger institutional reliability in clear contexts. This is because leaders match decision logic to the domain and deliberately shift motivational climate to fit. Everyone involved understands the underlying assumptions of the actions being taken.

CONCLUSION

Both Cynefin and reversal theory have been developed by skilled practitioners with robust backgrounds in research, systems thinking, phenomenology, and heuristics. The goal is to enhance our understanding of the psychosocial and emotional aspects of leadership as they manifest in situations of threat, challenge, or change (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

There have been many applications of both of these sense-making analytic frames in organizations using reversal theory (Carter & Davis, 2004; Carter, 2007; Tucker & Rutledge, 2007) and Cynefin (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; McFarlane, 2024; Paradigm21 Consultancy Group, 2025). Using these two thinking frames together helps leaders make sense not just of their situation and challenge but of their emergent leadership and personal development (Plowman et al., 2007).

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