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managing in the face of complexity

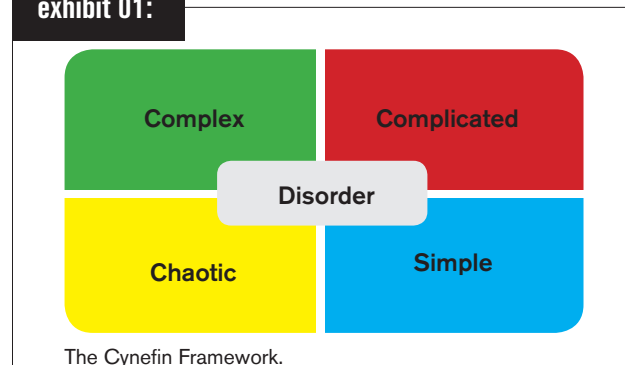
Complex scenarios demand a solving process that differs from the usual—an environment which allows conversations that spark creative ideas.

Managers and leaders face complex challenges and the need for change on a regular basis. Most of the strategies we have used in the past for problem-solving and decision-making, however, are inadequate for handling complex problems and continuous change. How do we manage problem-solving and change in today's world?

the Cynefin Framework

To guide problem solving, David Snowden developed the Cynefin Framework (see exhibit 01).¹ A simple problem is easily solved by following established practices or procedures. Complicated problems require experts; there is often more than one right answer, but there is an answer. In complex situations, the system is in constant flux. There are no clear solutions, and the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts. This is where most organizations find themselves today. Complex problems require a different

exhibit 01:



The Cynefin Framework.

“Cynefin, pronounced ku-nev-in, is a Welsh word that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that influence us in ways we can never understand.”

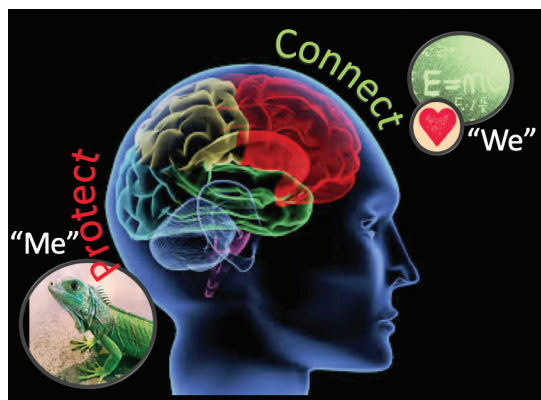
David Snowden and Mary Boone

problem-solving process, one that makes room for the emergence of novelty, innovation, and possibility. They are best resolved by engaging people with diverse perspectives in conversations that spark creativity and emergence.

whole system engagement

One of the most widely-used approaches for complex problem-solving is ‘appreciative inquiry’ (AI). AI is a strengths-based practice that engages whole systems in searching for the best of what is, dreaming what might be, designing pathways to live into dreams, and co-creating the future through cycles of action and learning. What makes AI unique is its grounding in social constructionism. This is the notion that we create our social systems through our shared conversations and meaning-making. At some point in the past, we created the current system as our best guess for what would support success. If the current system is no longer supporting success, we can redesign it by having a conversation worth having. Two simple appreciative inquiry practices make this possible: ‘generative questions’ and ‘positive framing’.

exhibit 02:



The neuroscience of conversation and problem-solving.

conversations worth having²

Conversations worth having require an open and curious mindset. Complex problems often generate a stress response, which triggers the release of cortisol, norepinephrine, and testosterone. The effect of this biochemical response inhibits access to the creativity

and higher-order thinking we need for solution-finding. The two AI practices—generative questions and positive framing—help shift a stressed mindset. These practices stimulate conversations that initiate the release of oxytocin, endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine. These hormones facilitate emotional intelligence, creativity, and critical thinking. People with diverse perspectives working together with an open and curious mindset have the potential to generate new knowledge and innovative ideas. A manager has the ability to fuel such conversations simply by engaging diverse stakeholders, asking generative questions, and intentionally framing their conversations.

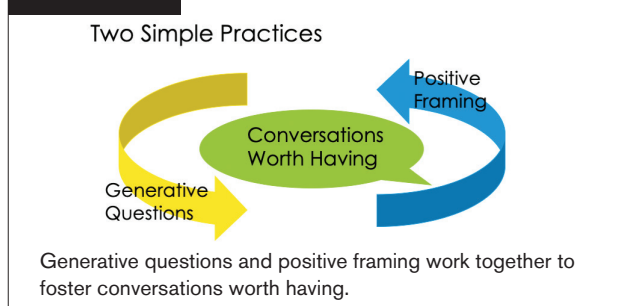
generative questions

A ‘generative question’ is one that changes the way people think. It creates a compelling image that inspires new possibilities and action. These questions inspire us to think outside of our ordinary frame and to challenge our assumptions. For example, many organizations are trying to figure out how to do more, faster and cheaper. Simple and complicated solutions look to fix the current system by establishing lean practices, resorting to overtime, and/or layoffs. You often hear, “There’s nothing more we can do, nothing more we can eliminate!” These strategies trigger a stress response, limiting our creativity. Generative questions stimulate an open and curious mindset:

- What are we trying to accomplish here? What is the desired outcome?
- How might we organize differently?
- How else might we achieve desired outcomes?
- How would people on the ‘front line’ reorganize the work to be more effective and efficient?
- If we freed up employee positions through lean practices, what else could those employees do to increase success?

Generative questions invite all stakeholders into a conversation to support the success of the whole. If you are a manager, it may be challenging to engage all employees. Traditional cultural norms around hierarchy may make it uncomfortable at first. Explain to employees why their knowledge, diverse viewpoints, and ideas are essential. No one person and no small group with limited expertise can solve these problems. It takes the eyes, hearts, wisdom, and knowledge of ‘the whole’ to make room for emergence.

exhibit 03:



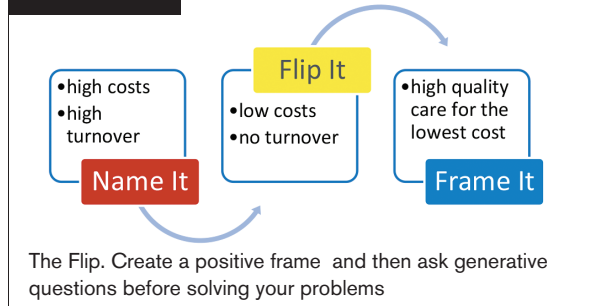
For example, a trucking company in North America implemented AI across the whole organization. A dock worker came up with the idea to give every trucker a cell phone and the phone numbers of customers along their route. Truckers let customers know if they had space to pick up a shipment as they were passing through. This small change generated over \$1 million in profit in one year and boosted customer satisfaction significantly. It took someone with knowledge and connection to the truckers as well as to shipping and loading to see this possibility.

positive framing

The second practice is 'positive framing': focus on what you want—the desired outcome(s) instead of the problem. For example, instead of focusing on fixing low performance, study high performance. What are high-performing teams doing that could be replicated? Instead of fixing turnover issues, have conversations with those who are engaged and committed. What can you learn from them?

Be mindful that our ordinary ways of seeing and working, which often create these challenges, will not help solve them. For example, a healthcare firm needed to create a cost-effective solution for delivery of services to the elderly. Round 1, The Fix: Nurses clocked in and out, took whoever was next on the docket, traveled to the person, provided the required services as quickly as possible, and moved on to the next. Initially, they saved money. However, the health outcomes of their patients declined, which increased demand. Nurse satisfaction plummeted, resulting in absenteeism and turnover. Costs soared.

exhibit 04:



Round 2, AI: They used an AI technique called Flipping³ to create a positive frame. They went from identifying a complex challenge to framing their desired outcome: 'highest quality care for the lowest possible cost'. Management engaged the nurses and the patients in conversations around high-quality care. Asking generative questions, they discovered relationships were at the heart of job and patient satisfaction as well as patient health outcomes. This resulted in a system where each nurse now had a group of patients that received consistent services from the same nurse every week. Each nurse spent more time with patients, building strong relationships and more deeply understanding their needs and routines. The results: improved patient health outcomes, higher patient and nurse satisfaction, improved care, increased retention, and lower absenteeism. Bottom line: costs decreased significantly.

the AI manager

Creative ideas and solutions emerge in appreciative and inquiry-based conversations. These two AI practices enable teams to respond effectively and with agility to both complex challenges and continuous change. And a manager's capacity to create high performing cultures is enhanced by using these practices to foster 'conversations worth having' anytime, anywhere, and in any situation. ■

01 Snowden, D. and M. Boone. (November 2007). Harvard Business Review. Available online October 29, 2019 <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-frame-work-for-decision-making>
 02 Stavros, J. and C. Torres. (2018). *Conversations Worth Having: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Fuel Productive and Meaningful Engagement* Oakland, CA: BK Publishing.
 03 Ibid, pages 50-54.