

Cynefin Sensemaking

Sort a messy pile of open problems into Cynefin's five domains and attach an action paradigm to each, so the team's next moves match each problem's shape.

DURATION

75

min

GROUP SIZE

—

people

WHAT YOU BRING

A list of 8-20 current problems written one per sticky note, plus a wall or whiteboard for the Cynefin canvas.

WHAT YOU LEAVE WITH

- A Cynefin canvas placing each problem in a domain
- An action paradigm and first concrete action per problem
- Named owners and dates for every action
- A two-week revisit cadence to update the map

WHO TO INVITE

- **Facilitator.** Ideally experienced with Cynefin; keeps domain definitions sharp and stops the session sliding into jargon.
- **Delivery lead.** Mandatory. Has to change how work runs if placements reveal a misfit, otherwise placements are only recommendations.
- **Engineering lead.** Holds most of the team's complex problems, often as frustrations with tools shaped for complicated work.
- **Product lead.** Owns subscriber and direction problems and often pushes complicated-shaped responses at complex-shaped problems.
- **Ops / CS voice.** The in-house complex-domain specialists; they know which problems have never responded to analysis.

USE WHEN

Retros keep producing actions that don't stick despite careful analysis

An initiative spans known fixes, research, crises and greenfield at once

Two people persistently disagree about how to handle a problem

A recent incident is about to drive a process change

AVOID WHEN

There is only one problem on the table, not several

The problems haven't been articulated yet – write them first

Cynefin is being used to justify a decision already made

The room can't safely hold open disagreement about placement

How the session runs

● Phase 1 – Brief the five domains (10 min)

Draw the four-quadrant canvas with confusion at the centre and walk through each domain with one definition and one example. Make explicit that domains describe problem shape, not difficulty.

● Phase 2 – Dump problems (10 min)

Each participant writes current problems on sticky notes, one per note, silent and unfiltered. Push generic topics and disguised solutions back into specific problem statements.

- **Phase 3 – Place problems on the canvas (20 min)**

A silent first pass places confident problems, then an open pass where someone picks up a note, proposes a placement and is challenged. Confusion in the middle is a valid, load-bearing placement.

- **Phase 4 – Argue the contested ones (15 min)**

For notes where placements disagree, one voice per side says why. The beliefs about cause exposed here are often more useful than the final placement; time-boxed split domains are a legitimate outcome.

- **Phase 5 – Choose an action paradigm (15 min)**

For each placed problem the room names its paradigm and first concrete action: playbook, analysis, safe-to-fail probe, stabilisation, or breakdown. Every action gets a named owner.

- **Phase 6 – Wrap up and commit (5 min)**

Photograph the canvas, read back paradigms and owners, and commit to a two-week revisit where probe data and broken-down confusion problems update the map.