

... and the Butterfly stamped

Type : Open Source

Family : System

This is a “warm up exercise” to enable people to understand a model and to prepare for model creation by social construction. People are asked to place sense-making items on to the model (illustrated here with the Cynefin framework). It can also be used to demonstrate to a group the degree to which different perceptions produce different results.

Overview

The butterfly stamping exercise is used for two concurrent purposes. First, it gives people an experience with using the generic Cynefin framework before they create their own contextualised Cynefin framework or do other Cynefin activities. Second, it provides the facilitator with a useful diagnostic of how people are responding to Cynefin ideas and what steps should be taken to help them apply them.

Why is this technique called "butterfly stamping"? Because one of the original items (butterfly migration) reminded somebody of a Rudyard Kipling story, "The Butterfly That Stamped", which is in itself an interesting story about multiple perceptions and their uses for strategic purposes. (Google "butterfly that stamped" and you'll find countless online versions of it.)

Essentials

This exercise is essentially the same as Cynefin categorization, except that the items being placed have been carefully chosen by the facilitator. Items for a butterfly stamping exercise have these characteristics:

- they all have to do with identities and interactions among them and thus encourage consideration of varying dynamics (from highly structured to chaotic)
- they are from widely disparate domains and thus encourage abstraction from particulars and consideration of global similarities
- they are ambiguous in their placement on a Cynefin framework and thus encourage discourse and dissent about the meanings of Cynefin concepts

Through manipulating the butterfly-stamping items together, people *internalize* the Cynefin framework by active and socially negotiated use of its concepts. The framework changes from

something they have passively heard about to something they have actively used and can use again.

Preparation - Making the List

Before the workshop, decide what your list of items will be. Depending on how much time you can spend on this (and how much help you think people need with grasping the concepts underlying Cynefin) you can include anywhere from 20 to 50 items. It's a good idea to include more items than you think people can place in the time you give them, to put a little pressure on. Also, if there are lots of items, slower-moving groups don't need to place all the items in the time given, but faster moving groups will have more to work with.

About three quarters of the items in a butterfly stamping exercise are generic and can be used in many situations. The other quarter should be chosen to reflect the backgrounds and concerns of the people in the workshop.

These are some standard choices for the 3/4 of your items which are generic::

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| • construction workers building a skyscraper | • people looking in a shop window |
| • five contractors called in at the last minute | • a butterfly migration |
| • a volleyball game at a company picnic | • an elephant matriarchy |
| • an automotive assembly line | • termites building a mound |
| • a political demonstration | • a wolf pack howling |
| • pedestrians at a crosswalk | • sharks circling |
| • a symphony playing Mozart | • a Canadian beaver dam |
| • neighbors at a block party | • corn stolen by deer |
| • interpreters at a UN meeting | • a coral reef |
| • people gathered around a crash site | • a spider's web |
| • a three-year-old's birthday party | • a bank of swallows' nests |
| • a local association of model railroad hobbyists | • a riot |
| • a submarine patrolling the Pacific | • a mob |
| • a medieval guild of candle makers | • a parliamentary body |
| | • rescue workers after an earthquake |
| | • an armed regiment |

...though of course you don't have to use exactly these items. Any items that fulfill the three characteristics above will do. Depending on the group of people you will be working with, you may want to make the domain spread wider (bringing in physics and cosmology, for example) or more narrow (replacing the biological items with political or historical items, for example).

Another way to populate the three-quarters of generic items, especially if you need a more narrow focus, is to draw your "generic" items from source documents which relate to the area the people in the workshop care about (say health care or telecommunications or mining). Read the documents and copy any pieces of text that involve interacting identities and are ambiguous. For example, these are a few items taken from historical texts about warfare which were used in one exercise:

- During the war it was lucky for us that the opposition was simultaneously engaged in another war
- Since the founding of the New nation, the economy and society developed rapidly
- Without the main Political Party, there would have been no new nation
- The government's inability to control the situation led riots and social insurrection to spread over the country

The remaining quarter of the items should be things that will resonate with people in the group from their history or common experience. For example, competing sports teams or different locally popular sports are often useful (entertaining as well as thought-provoking). Government agencies, people in the news recently, well-known places (a park or market or roadway or train or city) or common events (annual parade, official ceremony, holiday, season) are also useful. For people from the same organization, well-known events from the organization's history are also useful. Check that every item included is about multiple entities (human or otherwise) interacting in some way.

The next important thing to do when preparing your list is to ensure full coverage of the Cynefin domains. While you are preparing your list, decide for yourself where you think each item falls. Make a chart of your placements and look to see which domains are better represented than others. You want to end up with an equal number of items in each domain (including disorder). One way to do this is to group your items into blocks that relate to specific topics, and make sure there is an item for each domain in each topic. The generic list above does this, with the topics being (roughly) organizational, societal, cultural, sociobiological, biological constructions, and political. Or you can just count the number of items in each domain without making groups of items. If you don't have enough items in one Cynefin domain, change your list to make sure you have an even distribution. You may have to go through a few iterations of the list. You can also start with the generic list above and change one or two of the five-item blocks. Whatever you do, remember to randomly reorder the items so that you don't inadvertently give out the items in the order of the domains you placed them in!

Doing the Exercise

After you have explained the Cynefin framework, give people the list of items, either by showing it on a projection screen or by handing out pages with it printed on them. Ask the people to form small groups of 3-6 people (4 is best) and together place each item in one or more of the Cynefin domains. It's helpful to mention that the items were specifically chosen to be difficult to place, and that people should feel free to disagree and resolve issues in whatever way they think is best. Note that you are specifically not telling them how to resolve issues, because there are many possible ways one could do that (split items, copy items, draw shapes, draw connections, etc etc), and you want people to think on their own about how placing items in Cynefin space works. You may need to mention that there are no "correct" answers and that the exercise is not a test - you'd be amazed how many people are disappointed to find out there are no "answers".

There are, of course, answers of a sort, but don't tell people that. Recall that when you made your list you made a table of item placements. Keep that table at hand (or in memory) during the exercise, but *don't* show it to the people doing the exercise (even when they ask for it, and somebody always does). When the people have finished with the exercise, or while you are watching them during it, you can quickly form some observations about how they are reacting to the material and what that means about how you should adapt the next things you had planned to do. For example:

- You might notice that people are rarely placing any items in the space of disorder. This might mean that people are too focused on nailing down answers and not open enough to uncertainty. Or it just might mean that you didn't explain that part of the framework well enough.
- Conversely, you might notice that people are placing *too many* items in the disorder space. This may indicate a reluctance to engage in debate about the nature of items and/or a lack of energy and enthusiasm for the task (and thus possibly for the tasks ahead as well).
- You might notice that people are avoiding placing items in certain (non-disorder) domains - the usual pattern is to avoid the chaotic domain. This is often for lack of understanding of what that domain means; for example, a belief that chaos only means absolute mayhem and destruction may lead people to believe that nothing short of apocalypse belongs there.
- You might notice that people are resolving all disagreements about the placement of items by caveat, perhaps by the most opinionated or highest-ranking person. That will tell you that you need to make a special effort to get people to debate and discuss in the remainder of the workshop. You may also need to pull some people out of the groups for a concurrent exercise later on.
- You might notice that people are rarely if ever taking any steps to resolve conflicts about placement of items by doing anything to the items - for example, by splitting them into multiple items describing different aspects of the original items. Like placing too many items in disorder, this may indicate a willingness to accept a quick answer and a lack of interest in or enthusiasm for the process. It may also indicate that people have difficulty accepting that there can be more than one "answer".
- You might notice that people have placed anything outside of their main area of focus in complex or chaotic space: the biological items, for example, or the societal ones. (This is why

it's best to have items from several domains including unfamiliar ones in the list.) When you see this happening it means that people are not considering the similarities between different types of things acting in complex ways, which is an abstraction they need to be able to perform later when they do more work with Cynefin. You might want to give a few examples of ordered and unordered systems behavior in other domains (termites building a mound, magnets aligning, traffic jams) and show how they are similar to examples in domains the people are familiar with.

If you see a lot of these kinds of disturbing trends going on, there are a few different things you can do. With some groups it works to present the tabulated results of the exercise to them, and point out the trends you have seen directly, with explanations, perhaps followed by a second exercise (with a new set of items) so they can correct their misunderstandings of before. With some groups this direct approach will not work and you will need to subtly change the format of your exercises to come so that the trends you have seen can be addressed.

Note that we are assuming you will be able to tabulate the placement of items by multiple groups quickly. If you ask people to fill out forms for this, or mark up large sheets, you can do the tabulation either during the exercise if you have helpers who can keep up running totals, or during a short break after the exercise while the workshop participants chat and relax and you furiously count items. Or, you can opt for not doing actual counting but just getting a sense of how things are going as the exercise proceeds and using your gut feel as to what trends you see, what to tell people about them (if anything) and how to change the format of the workshop as a result.

If you are just starting out, don't worry too much about the diagnostic elements of the exercise because you can improve on your practice of them later, once you have seen a few groups go through the exercise. Eventually you will get an intuitive feel for what the exercise is showing you and will be able to use that right away as you go forward.

One other thing to remember about this exercise is that it should be light and fun for people, a fairly painless way to make sense for themselves out of the concepts behind the Cynefin framework. If this exercise goes well and people are able to converse in Cynefin terms after it, all subsequent exercises that you build on top of that will go more smoothly.