Ignite: Fueling Organizational Excellence

Making Progress When Things Aren't Clear

Andrew Statz, Senior Project Manager

October 21, 2026

Office of Strategic Consulting
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

My Beliefs

Ambiguity is a **natural part of our work**

- Unknown factors, downside risks, dependencies, unanswered questions, pending decisions

There are useful **constructs and tools** that can help us **"domesticate" uncertainty**

- Not eliminating risk, not ignoring risk, not being driven by risk
- Instead, taking something uncertain and making it legible enough that people can **reason about it, communicate about it, mitigate for it, and make decisions despite it**

There are also **ways of working** to support ourselves and others that can help

Moreover, we can **learn and enhance our ability** to handle ambiguity

Why Uncertainty Matters

Yes, uncertainty adversely **impacts our plans and outcomes**

- Slows decision making
- Results in delays that cost time and money
- Distorts our management of risks (we treat uncertainty as fact)
- Causes breakdowns in communication

It also results in **stress and reduces engagement**

- Ambiguity drives burnout and anxiety
- Risk-averse behavior takes over
- Stress about uncertainty is universal

And yet, uncertainty is a **normal part of meaningful work**

- Most complex problems cannot be fully defined at the outset
- Innovation requires exploring unknowns
- Learning occurs when assumptions are tested
- Progress often comes from making decisions with incomplete information
- Teams adapt as information emerges
- Leadership is demonstrated through action despite ambiguity

>>> React: Might this be even more true on a **major university campus?**

Useful Constructs

Uncertainty is Universal: SCARF Threats + Rewards

Developed by neurologist David Rock, **SCARF** explains how our brains naturally treat social and workplace as physical rewards to seek or threats to avoid

- **S**tatus – Relative importance and standing compared to others
- **Certainty – Ability to predict the future and feel secure in outcomes**
- **A**utonomy – Sense of control over choices and work decisions
- **R**elatedness – Sense of connection and safety with team members
- **F**airness – Perception of just, transparent, and equitable treatment

We all react to uncertainty

- Our brains react with the same stress response as a physical danger

"Name it to tame it"

>>> Chat: Please share **which of the SCARF elements** are you experiencing most lately

For more info: NeuroLeadership Journal; Explainer video

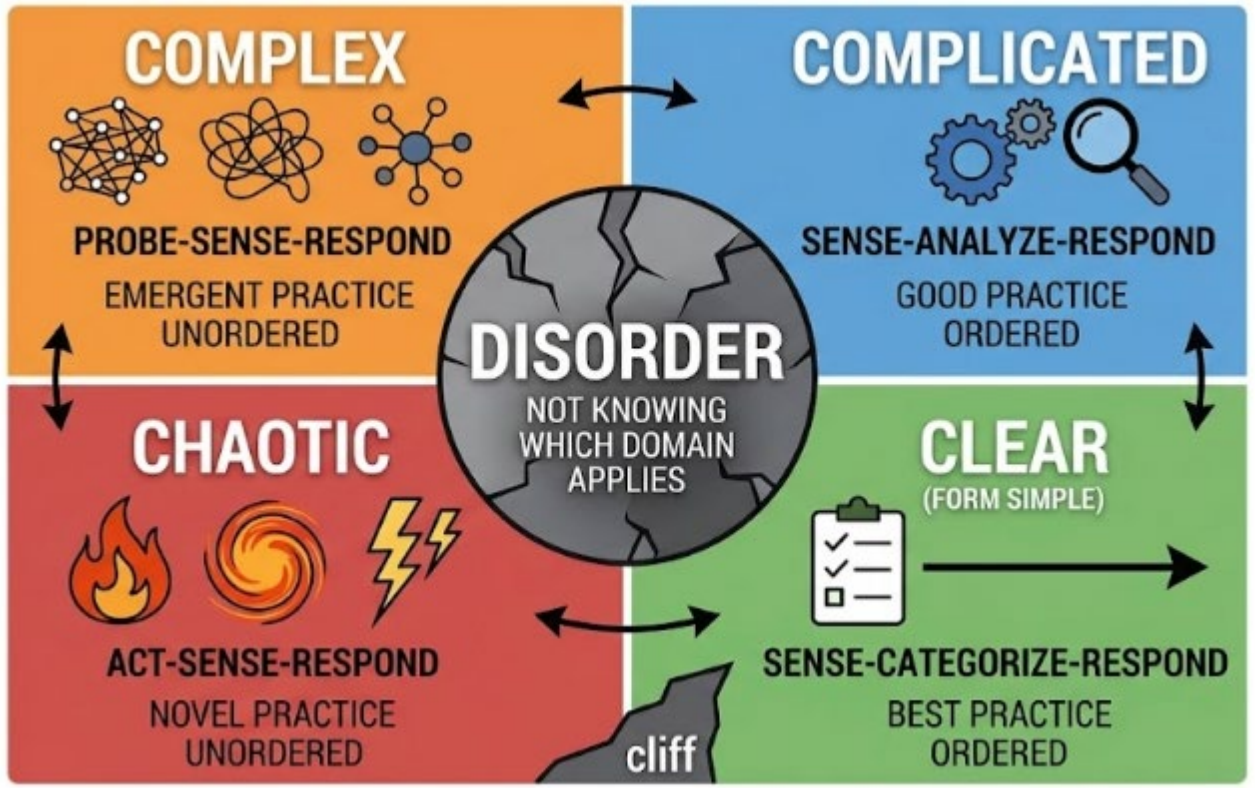
Understanding Ambiguity: Cynefin Framework

By consultant Dave Snowden, **Cynefin** helps us make sense of complex situations

The amount of **uncertainty requires fundamentally different decision-making approaches**

Beware of one size fits all!

- We're likely to be Complex situations, but we often want them to respond well to technical solutions
- Pick the best approach… you may have to experiment your way out



>>> Annotate: Please place an icon on the nature of a current challenge

For more info: Cynefin video; Harvard Business Review article

Technical Tools

Quadrant Analysis: Chart it out

Few things are binary

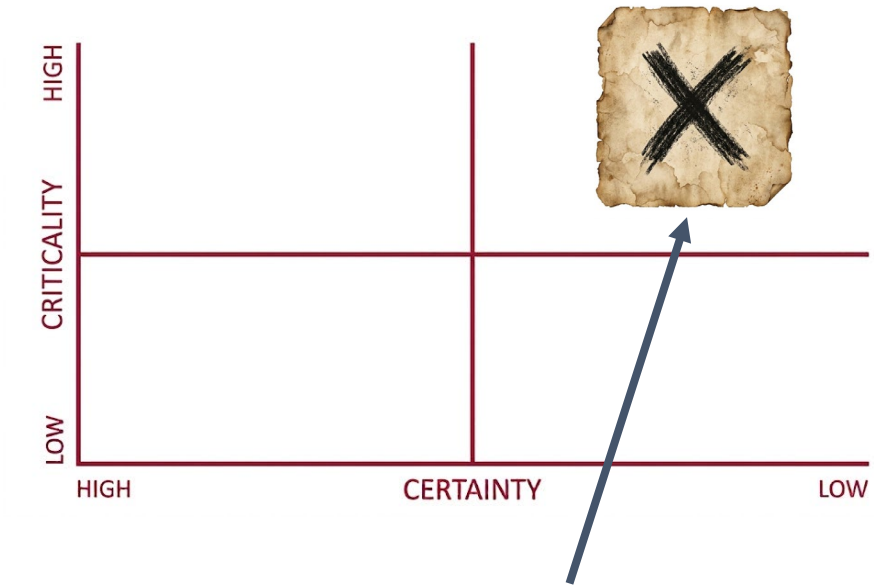
- Embrace the “vibrant shades of grey”

X-axis: **Certainty**

- Make a call as to how uncertain
- Nothing is 0 or 100% certain

Y-axis: **Criticality**

- How important is it that you get it right?
- How bad is it if you get it wrong?

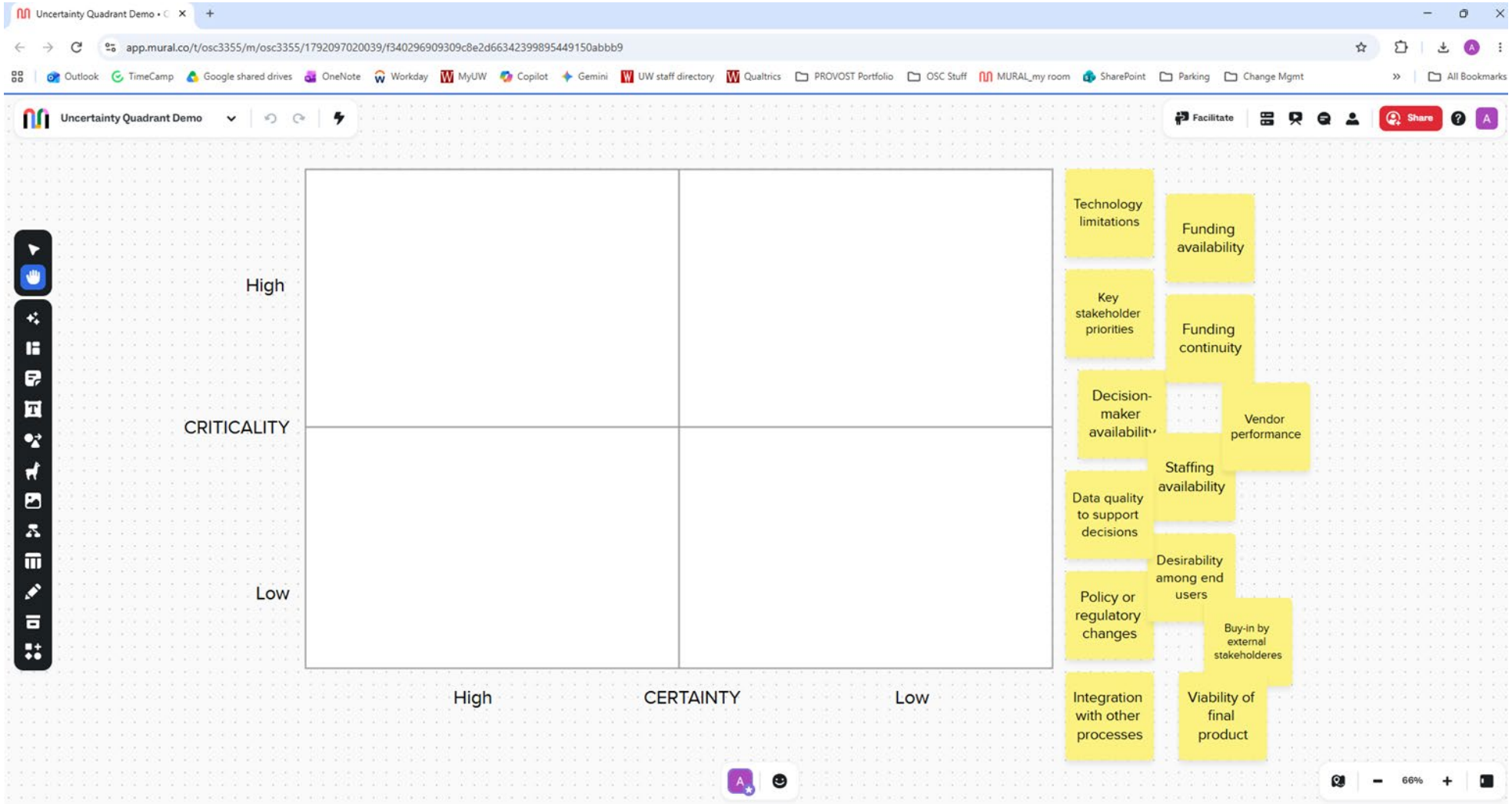


Plot it, then for **this quadrant first…**

- Seek answers from sponsors
- Engage coworkers
- Consult your favorite AI bot
- Develop mitigation strategies

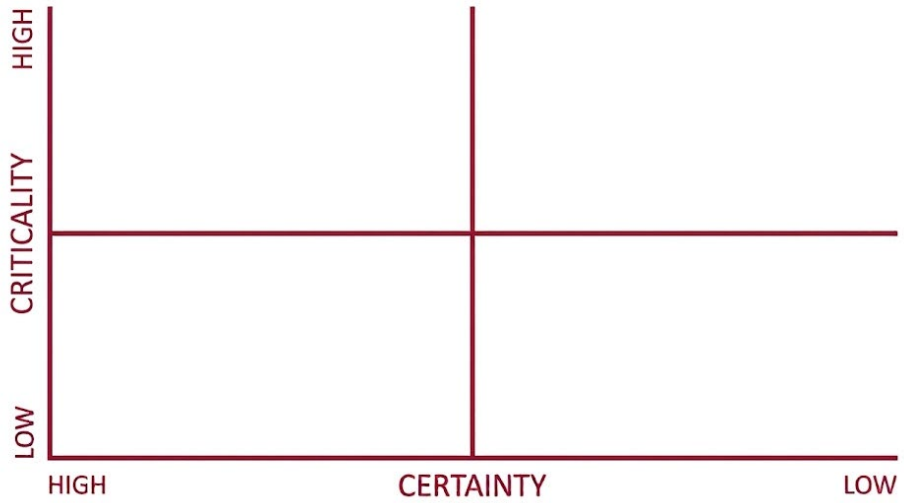
In person? Try **Post-its on a whiteboard.** Virtual? Try **Mural.** These are even useful as **mental exercises.**

Uncertainty Quadrant Demo in Mural



>>> It's your turn to chart it out

1. **Reflect** on a body of work you have right now
2. **Draw a quadrant** on a piece of paper or in your favorite app (Mural, Excel, Sheets)
3. **Identify** a handful of uncertainties you are currently facing for a current body of work
4. **Place** your uncertainties according to how uncertain they are and how critical they are
5. Consider the **upper right quadrant**
6. **What might you do** to reduce uncertainty for just on thing in that quadrant?
7. >>> Chat: Please share that **next step** to help reduce uncertainty



Technical Applications: Write it down, track it down

RAID Log

- **Risks** that haven't happened yet but can impact your outcomes
- **Assumptions** that are treated as true
  - Not all are created equal
  - Prove/disprove the important ones
- **Issues** that are currently impacting your outcomes
- **Decisions** that need to be or have been made

Can be **simple spreadsheet** columns for:

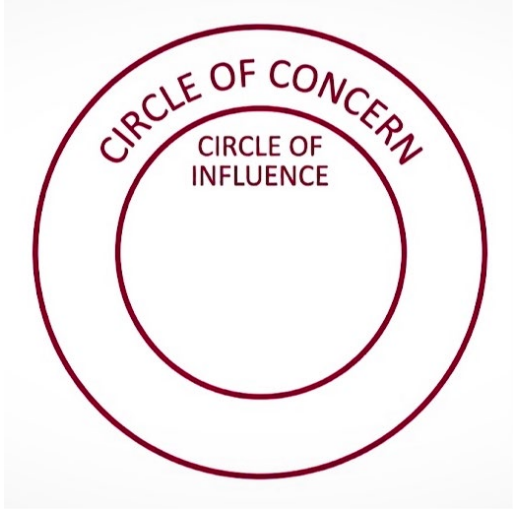
- **Topic** – Short description
- **Type** – Is it a Risk, Issue, Assumption, or Decision?
- **Why It Matters** – Potential impact on outcomes, timing, people
- **Owner** – Who will gather info, monitor it, or move it forward
- **Next Steps** – Actions being taken to reduce uncertainty, resolve the issue, test an assumption, or secure a decision
- **Status** – Where things stand today

Ways of Working

Reducing Anxiety During Uncertainty

Acknowledge that things will be uncertain and may even go off the rails

- Focus on your **circle of concern** and **circle of influence**



Also acknowledge our shared needs with **loving-kindness**

- Recognize that in times of friction, we all want the same things:
  - To be **Safe, Happy, Healthy, and to Live with Ease**
- Practice **Two-Way Compassion**
  - Direct these wishes inward to ease your own stress…
  - And outward to others, including those causing the complexity

Focus on Results

- Empathy and self care isn't just about comfort
- It **calms the emotional noise** so you can solve problems and make progress when things aren't clear

In summary...

In Summary…

Yes, **uncertainty matters**

- It impacts our plans and outcomes
- It creates stress and reduces engagement for ourselves and others
- But it's a daily reality

There are **constructs** that can help understand what we're up against

- **SCARF** to address core social needs
- **Cynefin** to match our response strategy to the actual level of uncertainty

Some **technical tools** can help prioritize our efforts to reduce uncertainty

- Quadrant analysis
- RAID Log

A few **ways of working** can help too

- Circle of Concern vs. Circle of Influence
- Two-way compassion

Thank you