

# Systemic Coaching

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**profweb**  
*learning*

# Systems and complexity

- We live in a complex and complicated world. We are continually reminded of the increasingly rapid rate of change. We experience the growing demand to do more with less.
- The people we coach make decisions, act, and react in the face of multiple competing agendas, rapidly changing circumstances, and the emergence of new and unpredictable problems and issues.
- How do we help our clients to manage in this world?

# Key Terms

- It is important to understand the difference between three types of systems: *simple, complex and chaotic systems*.
- A ***simple system*** is a system that is knowable or understandable.
  - Their functions and interrelationships are understandable and predicable.
  - *Simple systems* can be very complicated (this is different from being complex).

# Complex systems

- A **complex system** may have few parts or subsystems, or many.
  - Complex systems are recursive (iterative, repetitive), not linear. Responses and outcomes are not fixed, but change depending on what has gone before. This is most easily seen in **complex adaptive systems** where each member can react in its own right, adapt to changing circumstances and may be unpredictable or novel.
  - E.g. People behaviour is adapted according to their own goals, desires, personal characteristics, and predispositions stemming from their personal histories, DNA and the functioning of their own biological subsystems.
  - Responses are not simply mechanically repeated, but chosen, altered and adapted based on what has gone before and what is expected to happen in the future. (feedback and feedforward loops). They are circumstantial.

# Chaotic systems

- **Chaotic systems** are a type of complex system – or rather, chaos is a phase that complex systems often go through.
  - *Chaotic systems* are not without order. Rather, they are systems in which change appears to be so unpredictable and unstable as to be almost random.
  - Examples are: the weather, the turbulence of rivers, economies, and markets.
  - The level of stability and predictability of these systems is low when viewed in a fine grained way. For example, we cannot accurately predict the weather more than a few days in advance.
  - A system can be said to be chaotic when there is little or no agreement about how to act, and little or no predictability about what might happen should that action be taken.
  - However, under conditions where there is high agreement and high predictability, then management using rational decision making, or decision making based on linear models of cause and effect, is most appropriate.
  - Human systems, and indeed most natural systems tend to function within this space, and are characterised by self-organisation and emergence. (defined later).
  - Instead they hold that human organisations and the creation of knowledge are best thought of as complex responsive processes – unfolding processes in a changing context.
  - Organisations are typically self –organizing and emergent.

# Complex

*Uncertain*

Cause & effect only obvious in hindsight, with unpredictable, emergent outcomes.

**Probe. Sense. Respond.**  
***Emergent practice***

# Complicated

*Knowable*

Cause & effect relationships exist, but not obvious, so require analysis/investigation +/- expert knowledge.

**Sense. Analyse. Respond.**  
***Good practice***

*Several options*

**DISORDER**

# Chaotic

*Unknown*

No cause & effect relationships can be determined.

**Act. Sense. Respond.**  
***Novel practice***

# Simple

*Known*

Cause & effect relationships exist, are obvious to most people & predictable & repeatable. Can be known in advance.

**Sense. Categorise. Respond.**  
***Best practice***

# Simple, complex and chaotic spaces: An adaptation of the Stacey Certainty/Agreement Matrix.

Source: Cavanagh and Lane (further adapted by Kehayas)

Coaching Approaches:  
Solution Focused  
Strengths Based  
Mindfulness

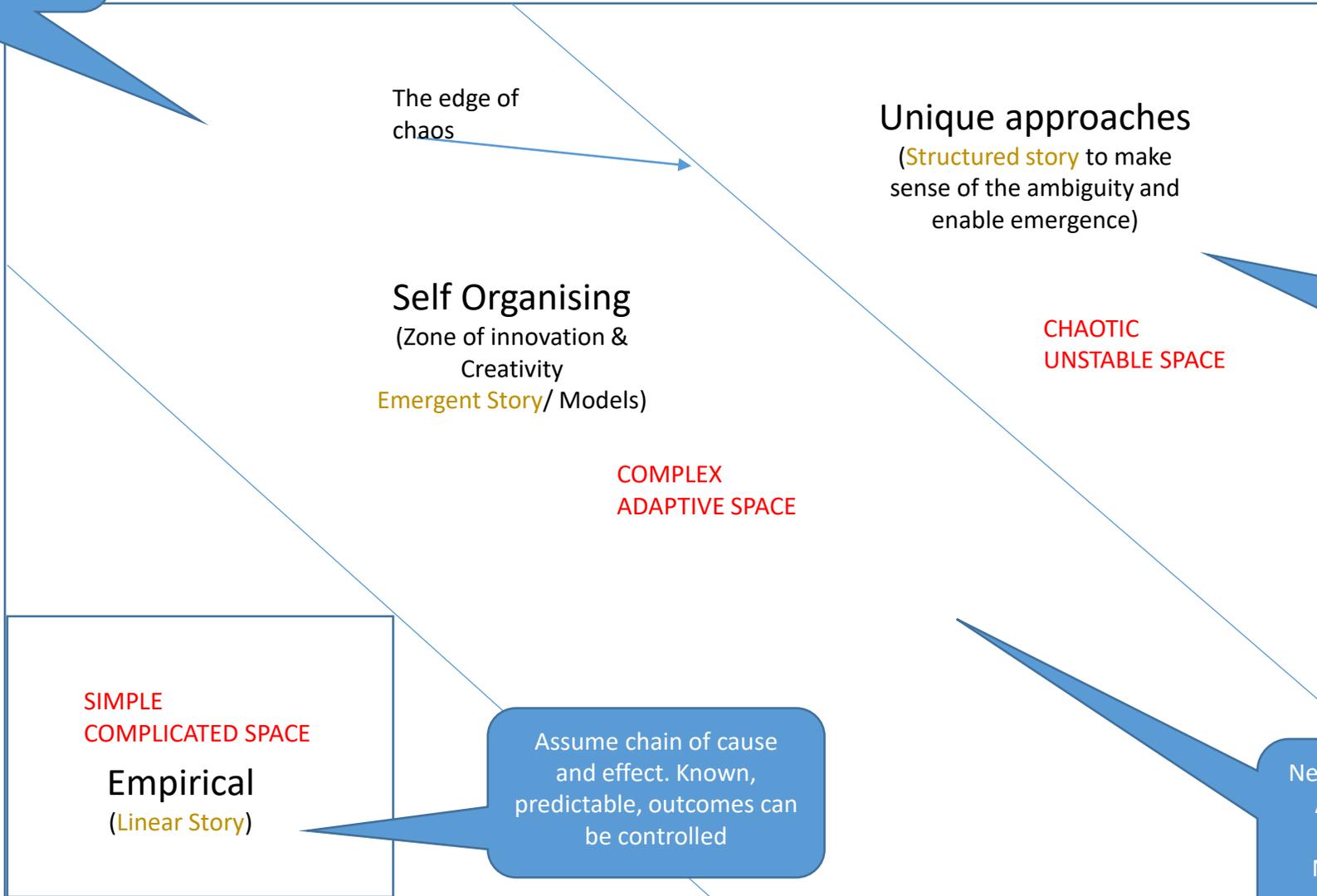
Low



Agreement on what to do



High



**SIMPLE  
COMPLICATED SPACE**

**Empirical**  
(Linear Story)

Assume chain of cause and effect. Known, predictable, outcomes can be controlled

**Self Organising**  
(Zone of innovation & Creativity  
Emergent Story/ Models)

**COMPLEX  
ADAPTIVE SPACE**

The edge of chaos

**Unique approaches**  
(Structured story to make sense of the ambiguity and enable emergence)

**CHAOTIC  
UNSTABLE SPACE**

New & Unique situations. Ambiguity & anxiety. Self organisation. Total unpredictability. Multiple possibilities.

New & Unique situations. Ambiguity & anxiety. Self organisation. New and unexpected outcomes

High

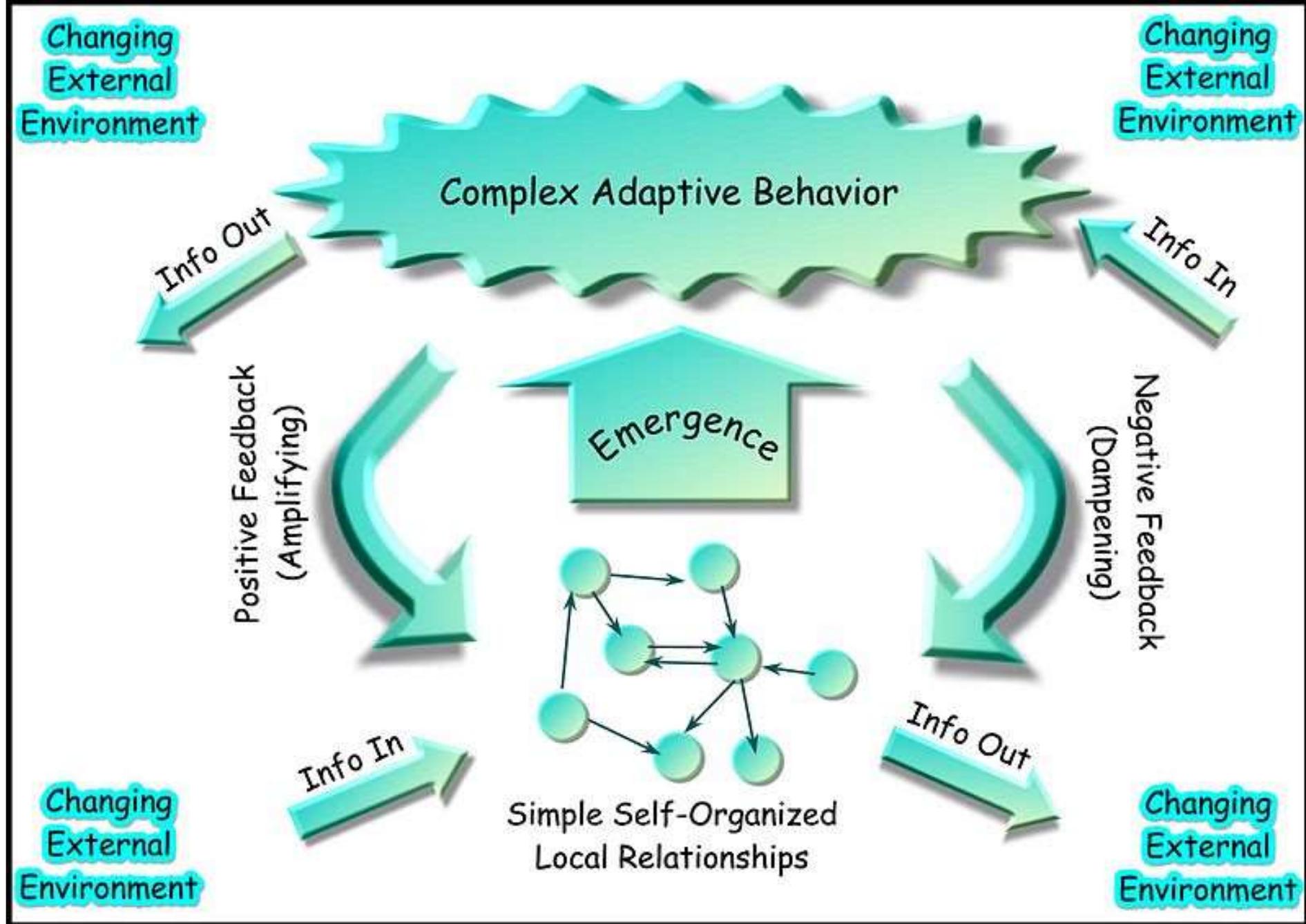
**Predictability of outcome**



Low

# Emergence

- **Emergence** is a term used to denote the process by which the characteristics of a system emerge from the interaction of the system parts, and not from those parts themselves. This is true of human systems.
- A team is not simply the sum of its parts; it emerges as a result of the interaction of its members. Remember this in team coaching.
- Emergence is itself a process characterised by increasing connectivity, networking and feedback.
  - Connectedness requires a *distributed knowledge* system. It circulates throughout the system and communication and collaboration are key.
- Self- organisation emerges and is internally generated ... rather than being the product of external control. Order is not imposed; it emerges spontaneously, of itself, whether we like it or not; it is control that is imposed.



Source: Wikipedia

# The features of complex adaptive systems

- Once we add the human element, a system becomes more complex and adaptive.
- At times, human systems can enter into chaotic phases marked by instability, confusion or even breakdown.
- Three difficulties in dealing with human systems:
  1. Many of the models of leadership and change we use as practitioners are built on the assumption that our clients and the contexts in which they work, can be treated as if they are linear systems – governed by simple (or complicated) linear chains of cause and effect.
  2. We cannot assume that the objects of our research behave in ways that are stable predictable and linear.
  3. Coaches cannot assume that their knowledge or practice enables prediction or practices that work every time.

# Implications for coaches



We require many models and skills.



As the rate of change increases, we need to develop our ability to recognise, adapt and respond appropriately to the system dynamics at play in any situation we face.



Theories and models typically seek to describe and explain some aspect of the world. We must be careful that they do not close down the exploration of appropriate possibilities in the coaching conversation.

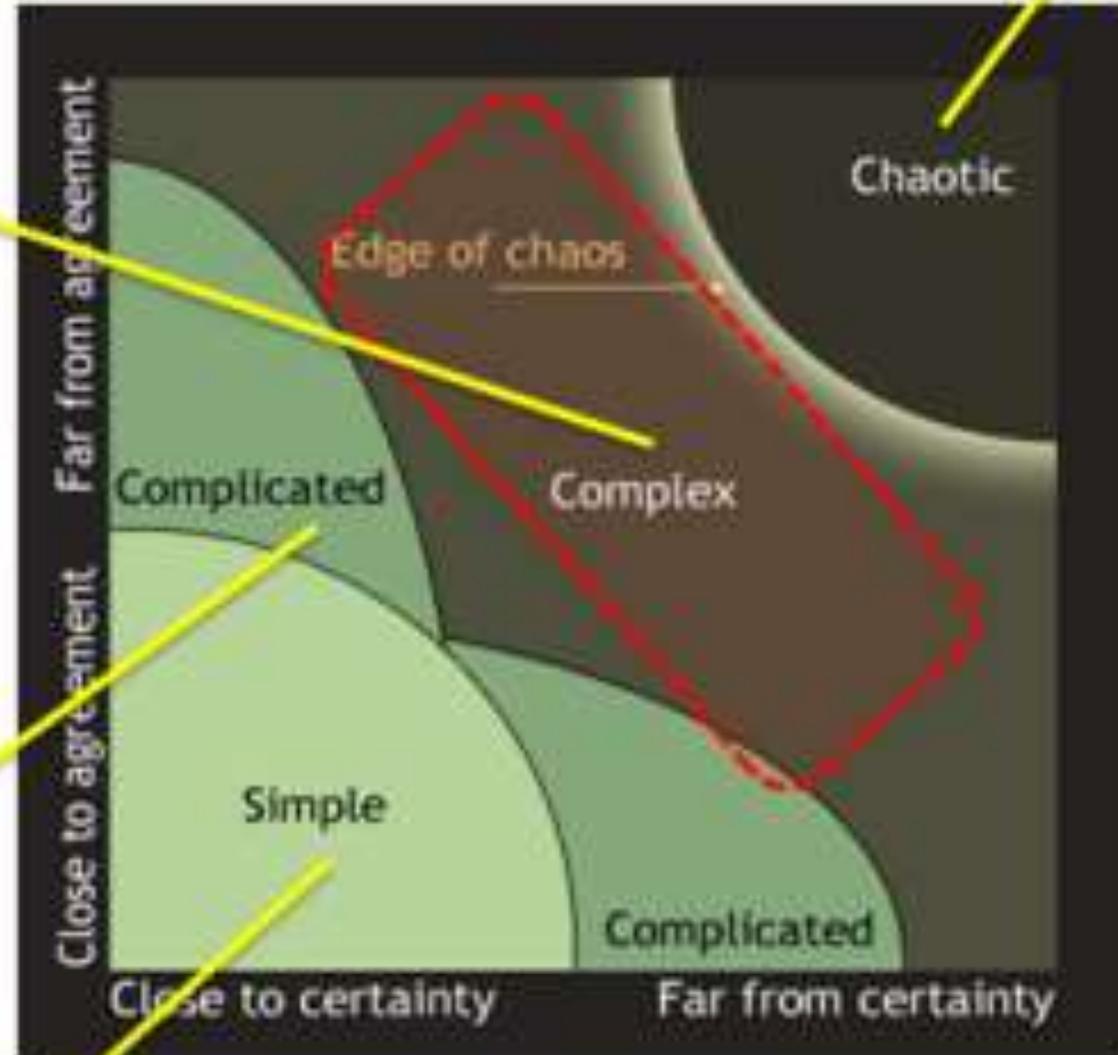


Evidence based practice seeks to gather reliable and reusable approaches to specific situations – not appropriate for chaos, because they seek to guide and predict. We cannot always assume that there is a chain of cause and effect, especially when faced with new and unique situations.

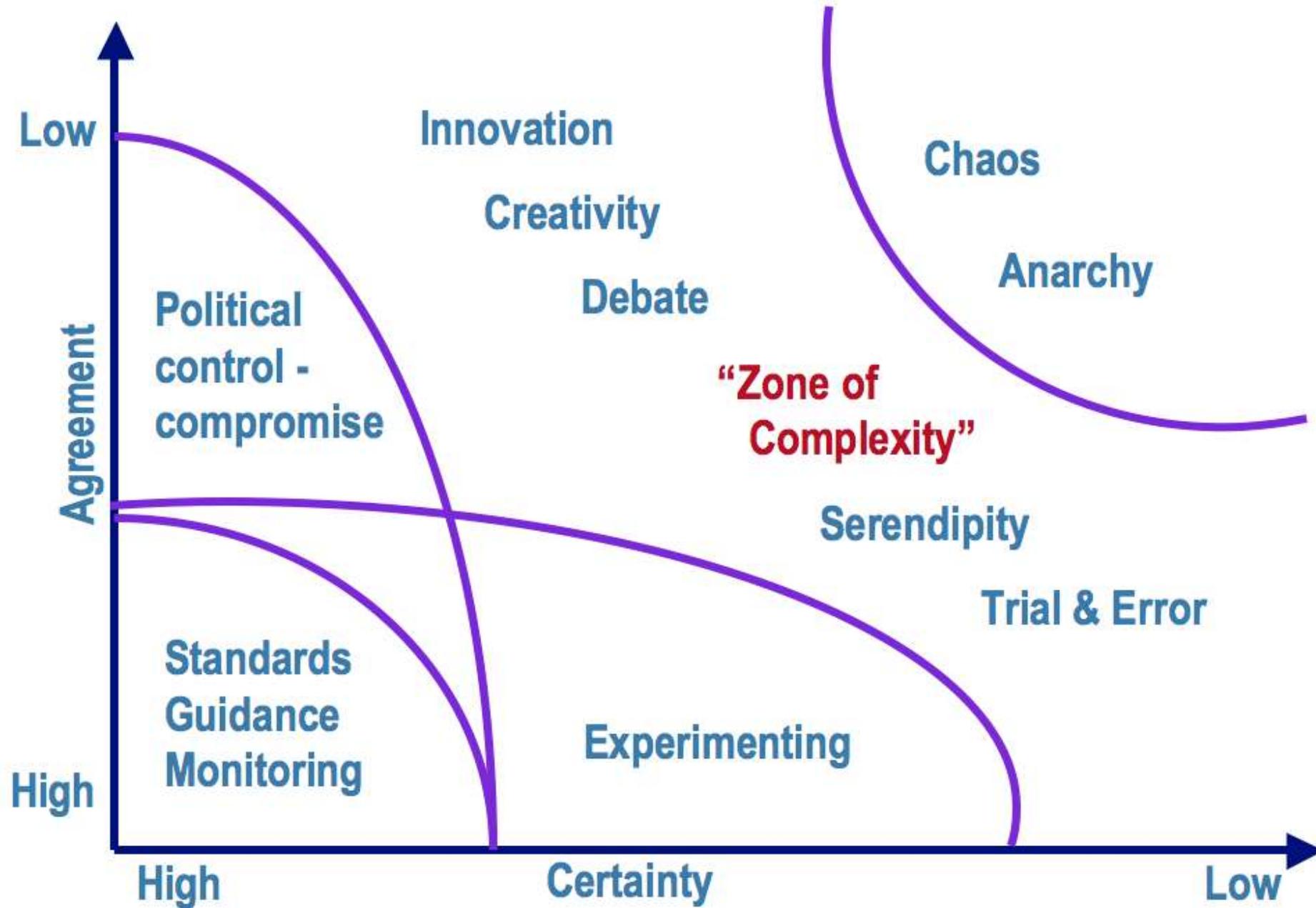
*No clear relationships between cause and effect even if inspected.  
The approach is to Act, Sense, Respond and we can discover novel practice.*

*The relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect, but not in advance. Inspect and Adapt.*

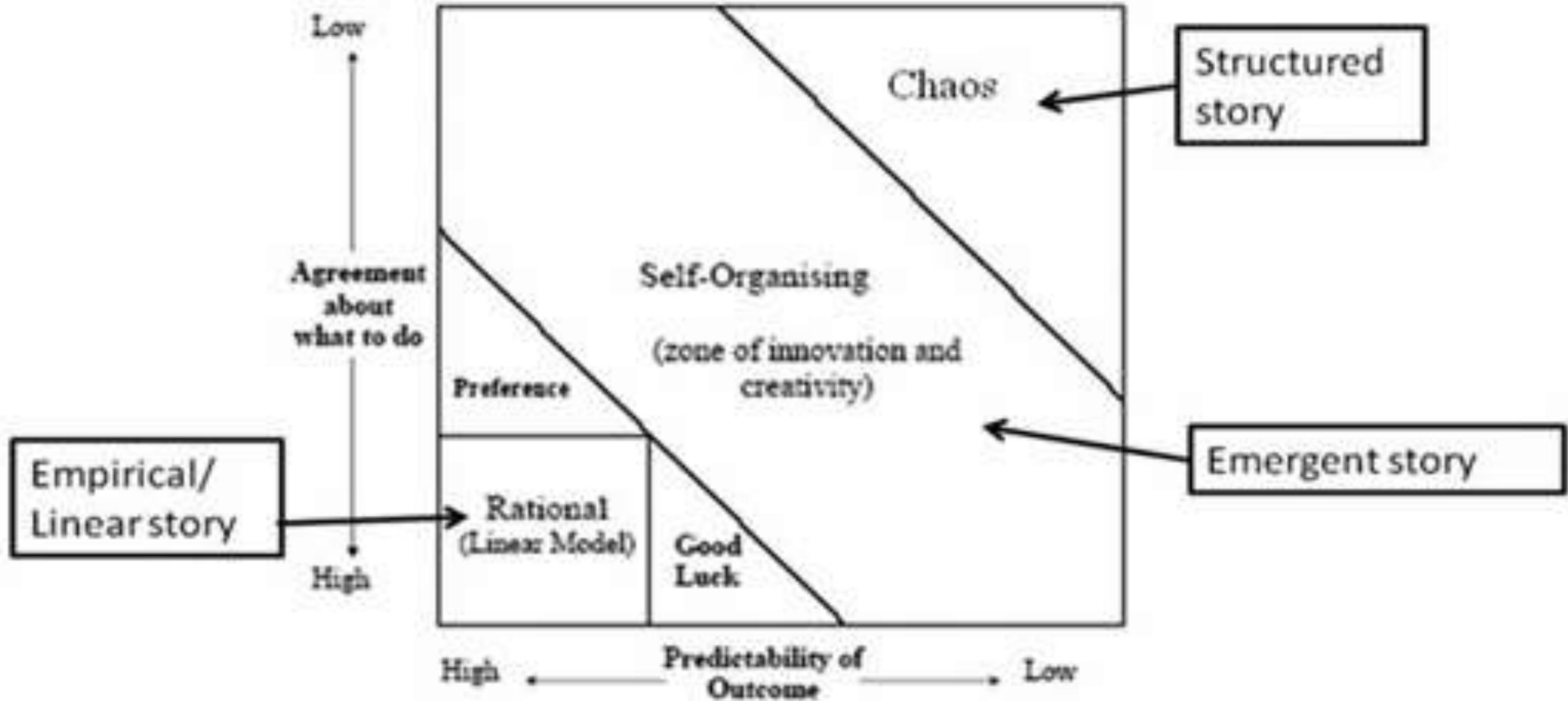
*Cause and effect can be understood only analyzing or investigating the system and its mechanisms. Apply good practices.*



*Relationships between cause and effect are evident. Apply best practices.*



# Coaching practice in simple, complex and chaotic spaces



# Coaching on the edge of chaos

- We need models that enable us to function in the space on the edge of chaos. This space is characterised by ambiguity and anxiety due to the lack of predictability and agreement. It is a space in which behaviour tends toward self-organisation. We need models that take seriously the notions of non-linear causation and radical unpredictability, and the 'ground up' nature of emergent processes.
- Linear models seek what is common, not what is different. On the edge of chaos, it is precisely the tension created by the diverse responses in the system that stimulates emergence of creative, innovative responses.
- Emergent models seek to engage diversity in order to create multiple, new and unique solutions commensurate with the irreducible uniqueness of the issue being faced.
- In coaching, the solutions-focused approach and strength-based and mindfulness-based approaches have developed in an attempt to partially meet this need. Other models that are applicable are : Theory U, World Café and Dialogue.
- There are also some decision making techniques and processes such as scenario planning, robustness analysis, group decision support systems, and problem structuring methods.
- These realities and challenges have been recognised by competent and experienced coaches who adapt behaviours and models to the unique situation.

# Coaching approaches that enable emergence

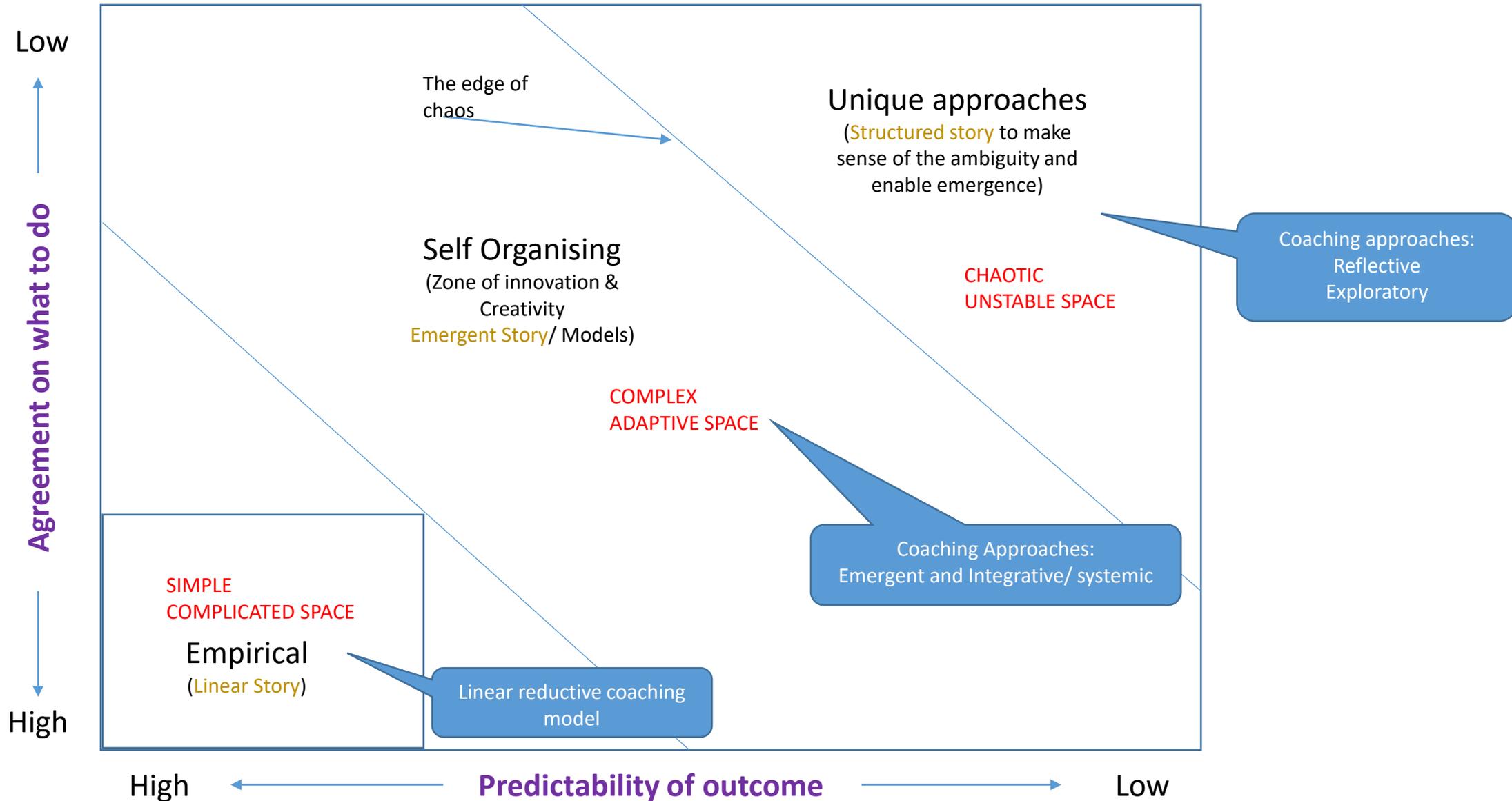
- The most useful techniques foster dialogue, creativity, openness to diversity, development of feedback and open communication (including feedback).
- The primary task of the coach here is to help create the conditions in which the system can move toward more adaptive self-organising functioning. In order to do this, effective meaning must be created amidst confusion. Overwhelming anxiety must be contained, and brought back to manageable levels, and a platform of trust built to support the dialogue and connectivity needed for self-organising activity.
- By the creation of effective meaning amidst confusion, we mean that the client must find meaning that is capable of helping them to structure their experience in ways that open up pathways to adaptive change.
- When there is anxiety and confusion, people tend to grasp at anything that could address their situation. (this applies to coach and coachee).

# Reflection and multiple possibilities

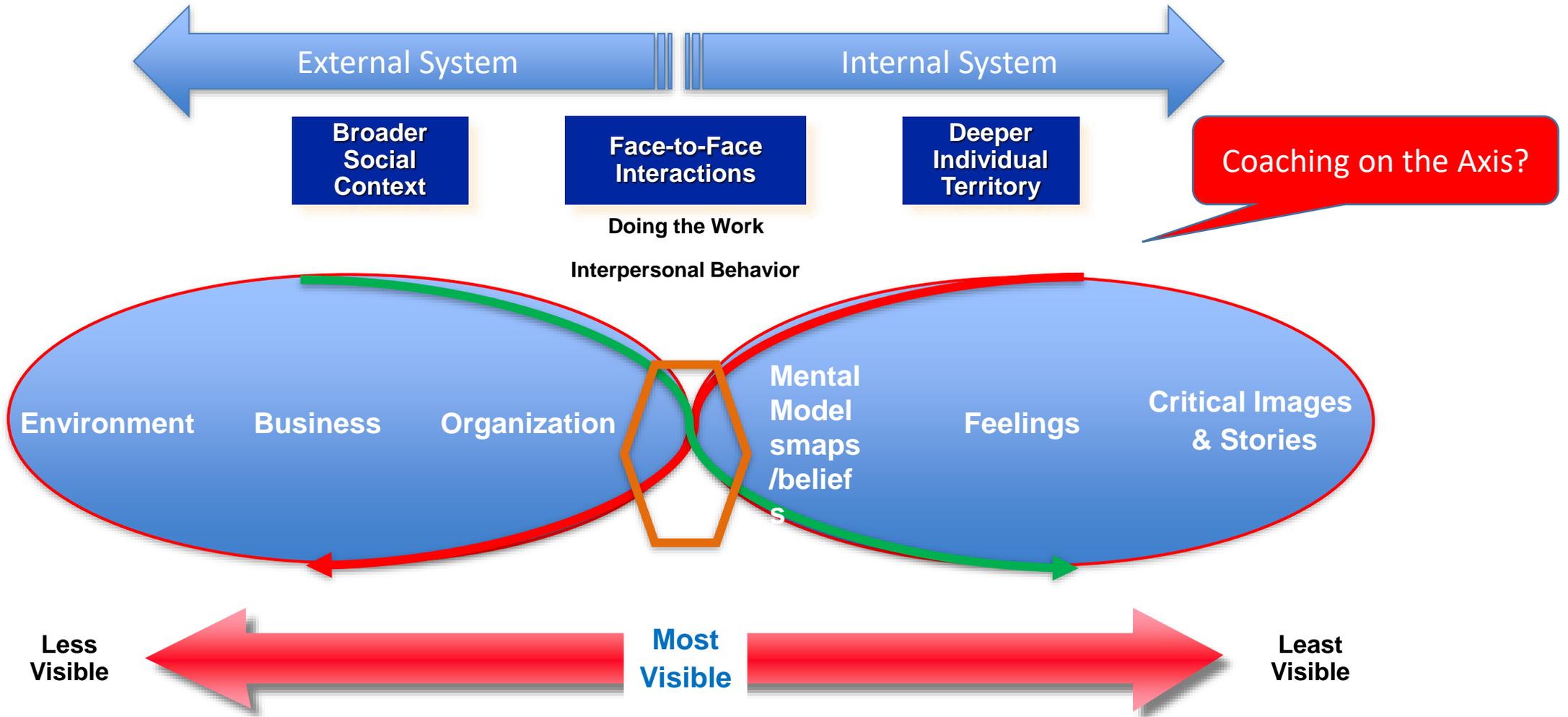
- It is important to notice and reflect on the qualitative themes present in the client's situation, and to think through together the possible trajectories of outcome that any action might precipitate.
- This is not to suggest that the coach or client should seek to predict with any degree of certainty, what might unfold or to find a single course of action.
- Rather, the task is to hold those multiple possibilities in mind and design actions that maximise the ability to respond flexibly as outcomes emerge.
- Self organisation within systems requires collaborative connectivity. Innovation emerges from the tension created by diverse and distributed perspectives and knowledge.

# Matching Models to context.

Source: Cavanagh and Lane (further adapted by Kehayas)

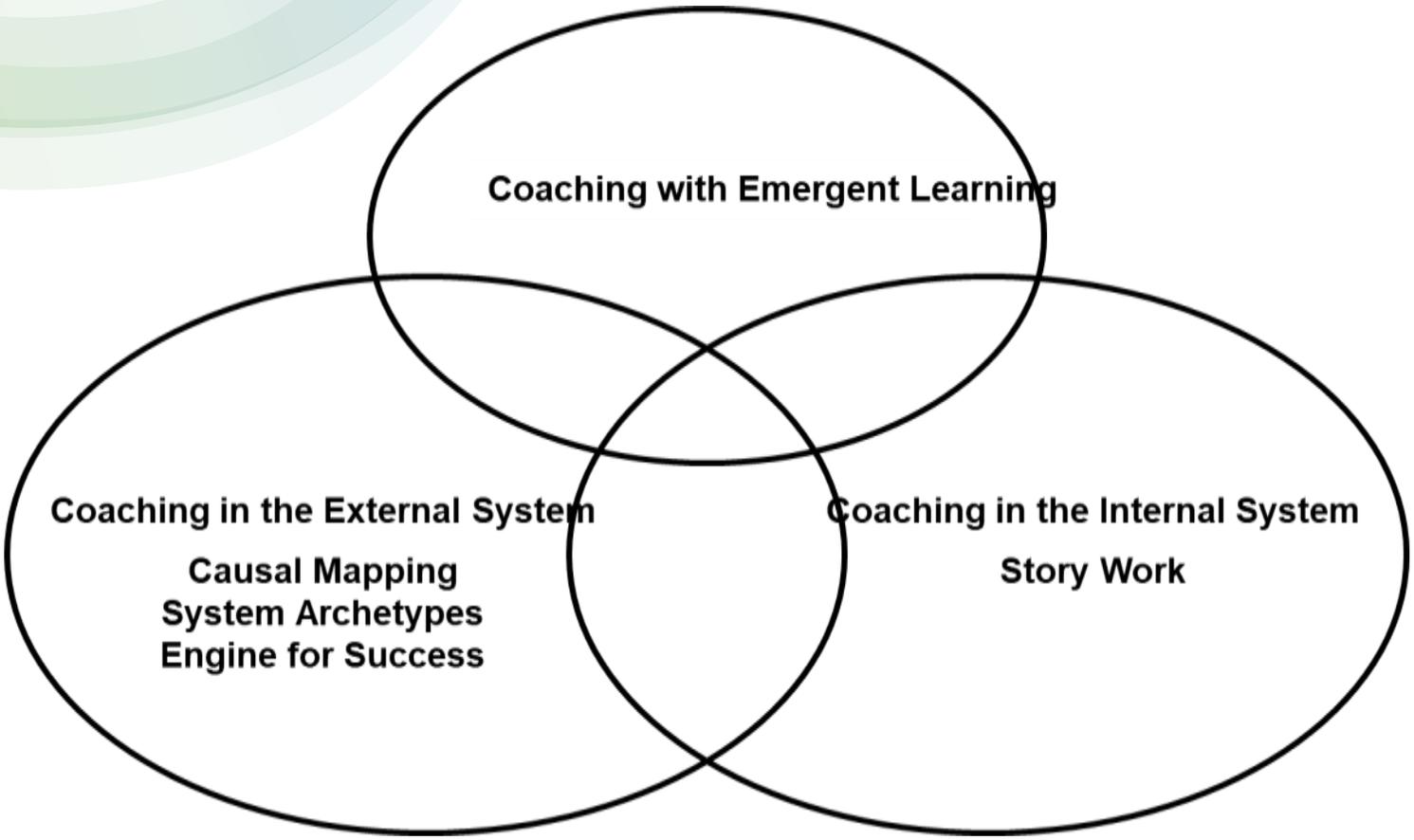


# Butterfly Model of Complex Human Systems



**RESULTS** are produced by the whole system and the interdependencies within it ... they occur at the interface of the external and internal aspects of the system

# Butterfly Model — Major Tools



# Coaching in the External System

## Two Ways of Viewing Causality

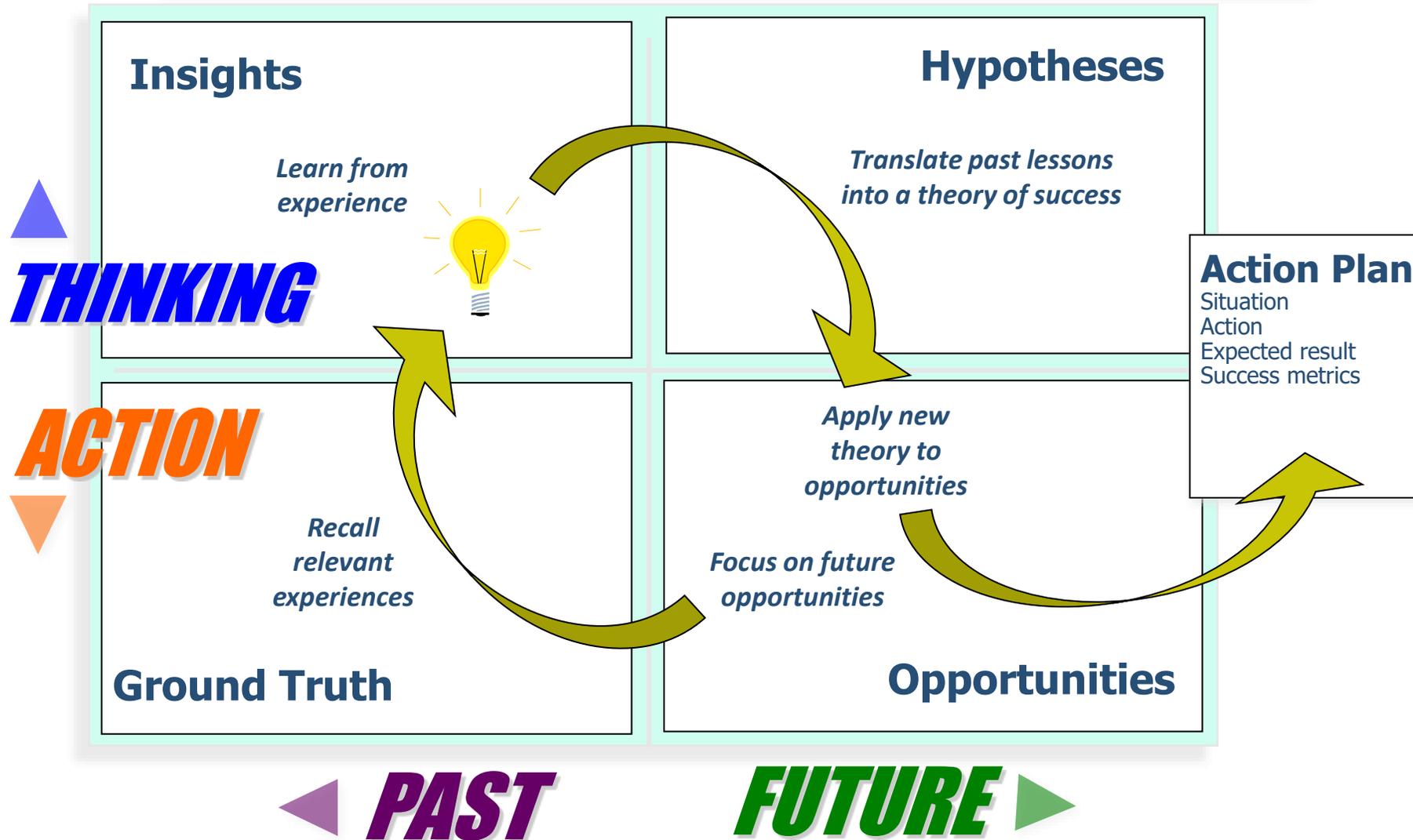


**Predictable**



**Unpredictable**

**Framing Question: What Do We Know About...?**



## EL Mapping Hints

### **Framing Question:**

How can we understand (something)? What will it take to... ? How is ... happening?

Clear, forward-focused questions.

- Focus on the relationship between past results and what caused them
- Link clearly to Ground Truth data
- *No ungrounded assertions!*

#### INSIGHTS

- Link Hypotheses to both Insights and Opportunities
- Look for Hypotheses you can test in real work and find concrete metrics you can test them against
- “If” (action), “then” (results)

#### HYPOTHESES

#### GROUND TRUTH

- Talk about actual past situations, events or results
- Everyone should be able to agree with Ground Truth data
- Include both positive and negative examples

#### OPPORTUNITIES

- Start with what exists already (e.g., it's already in someone's calendar)
- Add new actions only when absolutely necessary (this is *not* traditional Action Planning...this is about applying “lessons learned” to the work you already plan to do)

# Coaching Protocol, Combining External Systems & Emergent Learning

- Preparation
  - Observe, observe, observe.
  - Listen to the story.
  - Draw the graphs.
  - Clarify your focus in a framing question.
- Ground Truth
  - Record real data, defining moments, patterns and changes.
- Insights about the Past
  - Create a well-supported, valid, and meaningful explanation of what you have seen.
  - Create a diagram to keep track of complexity. Use an archetype if it fits.
  - Add the “thought bubbles.” (Mental Models)
  - What values are really important in this case?

# Coaching Protocol, Combining External Systems & Emergent Learning

- Hypotheses about the Future
  - What does all this suggest to us about the future?
  - What insights shall we apply and test?
  - Look for leverage.
- Action Planning
  - Look at the calendar. Start with opportunities that exist already.
  - Look for recurring and iterative opportunities.

# Experiencing your Systemic Story

- Premises
  - We each have a few core systemic stories. They reflect how we have learned to operate in systems, for example, how we learned to:
    - Get attention or avoid getting attention
    - Be successful or avoid being successful
    - Take risks and keep ourselves safe
    - Give and receive love
  - The basic plotlines of our systemic stories were formed in the first system of which we were a part. They are the stories we have told ourselves about our experiences there.
  - Our systemic stories have a significant impact on our behavior in the present, especially as the stakes go up.
    - The higher the stakes, the more likely our systemic stories are to become engaged and play themselves out in our present-day behavior
  - Seeing systemic stories and how they play out in our lives and in our coaching is very high leverage in our work as systemic coaches

# The Essence of Story Work

- Identify the Present Dilemma  
(Get permission to coach at story level--Establish the Agreement)
  - What is the presenting EVENT?
  - How are you responding to the event?
  - Are you interested in exploring this at the story level?
  - Does this response tend to be a repetitive PATTERN (storyline) in your life? If so, how?
- Explore the Story
  - What role did the story play in your original system (STRUCTURE)?
  - How did it play out and who played what roles?
  - What thoughts, beliefs, and feelings did you develop about the story, the other players, and about yourself?
  - What have been your resulting behaviors?

# The Essence of Story Work

- Develop Possible Alternatives
  - What are some other ways you might see this?
  - What other behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions could you hold?
- Choose your New Story
  - What is the story you want to create, the story you choose to live?
  - What behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions support your new story?
- Commit to Practice
  - What commitments do you choose to make?
  - How will you reinforce the new beliefs and assumptions?
  - How will you practice the new behaviors?

# Sources:

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