Agreement and Certainty Matrix


The basic idea behind the matrix:
It is a method to select the appropriate management actions in a complex adaptive system based on the degree of certainty and level of agreement on the issue in question.

The potential context for use:

• Choosing between management or leadership approaches for a specific issue or decision.

• Making sense of an array of decisions (or agenda for a group).

• Communicating with others why a particular approach is appropriate.

• When innovations and creative alternatives are needed, this matrix can be used to deliberately try to increase the uncertainty and disagreement to nudge the system to the edge of chaos thus disrupting the status quo in the desire to find alternative solutions.

This is what it looks like:
Modeled from Stacey ‘Complexity and Creativity in Organisations’
The art of management and leadership is having an array of approaches and being aware of when to use which approach. Ralph Stacey proposed a matrix to help with this art by identifying management decisions on two dimensions: the degree of certainty and the level of agreement.
Close to Certainty:
Issues or decisions are close to certainty when cause and effect linkages can be determined. This is usually the case when a very similar issue or decision has been made in the past. One can then extrapolate from past experience to predict the outcome of an action with a good degree of certainty.

Far from Certainty:
At the other end of the certainty continuum are decisions that are far from certainty. These situations are often unique or at least new to the decision makers. The cause and effect linkages are not clear. Extrapolating from past experience is not a good method to predict outcomes in the far from certainty range.

Agreement:
The vertical axis measures the level of agreement about an issue or decision within the group, team or organization. As you would expect, the management or leadership function varies depending on the level of agreement surrounding an issue.

Let's look at some of the combinations.

1. Close To Agreement, Close To Certainty
Much of the management literature and theory addresses the region on the matrix which is close to certainty and close to agreement. In this region, we:

   • use techniques which gather data from the past and use that to predict the future.
   • We plan specific paths of action to achieve outcomes and
   • monitor the actual behaviour by comparing it against these plans.

This is sound management practice for issues and decisions that fall in this area. The goal is to repeat what works to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

2. Far From Agreement, Close To Certainty
Some issues have a great deal of certainty about how outcomes are created but high levels of disagreement about which outcomes are desirable. Neither plans nor shared mission are likely to work in this context. Instead, politics become more important. Coalition building, negotiation, and compromise are used to create the organization's agenda and direction.

3. Close To Agreement, Far From Certainty
Some issues have a high level of agreement but not much certainty as to the cause and effect linkages to create the desired outcomes. In these cases, monitoring against a preset plan will not work. A strong sense of shared mission or vision may substitute for a plan in these cases. Comparisons are made not against plans but against the mission and vision for the organization. In this region, the goal is to head towards an agreed upon future state even though the specific paths cannot be predetermined.

4. Anarchy: Far From Agreement, Far From Certainty
Situations where there are very high levels of uncertainty and disagreement, often result in a breakdown or anarchy. The traditional methods of planning, visioning, and negotiation are insufficient in these contexts. One personal strategy to deal with such contexts is avoidance - avoiding the issues that are highly uncertain and where there is little disagreement. While this may be a protective strategy in the short run, it is disastrous in the long run. This is a region that organizations should avoid as much as possible.
5. The Edge of Chaos (The Zone of Complexity)

There is a large area on this diagram which lies between the anarchy region and regions of the traditional management approaches. Stacey calls this large centre region the zone of complexity - others call it the edge of chaos. In the zone of complexity the traditional management approaches are not very effective but it is the zone of high creativity, innovation, and breaking with the past to create new modes of operating.

Managers and leaders of organizations need to have a diversity of approaches to deal with the diversity of contexts.

An excellent article by Stacey on Knowledge Management may be of interest to you and I think it will help clarify the above model and his particular views on Systems Theory. A few excerpts below.

“I’m going to take an aspect of managing knowledge — managing knowledge workers — and talk about that as an illustration of the main point that I want to put to you, my argument being that we’re putting a lot of effort into managing knowledge when I believe that this is not possible.

I hope to give you an indication at least as to why I hold this particular view. We’re all taking a growing interest in the question of managing knowledge. The background is a shift in the relative importance of economic activity from making things to providing services for each other, and providing services depends upon being knowledgeable, being skilful”

‘A whole movement has grown up trying to measure what is called intellectual capital. I’m not proposing to say very much about that, except maybe that if you look carefully at what is being measured, I wonder whether it is coming anywhere near measuring knowledge or intellectual capital. For example, one measure that springs to mind is measuring the number of days that people in an organisation spend on going to management development courses.

As far as I can see, all that does is measure what it says it’s measuring, the number of days people go to courses. What they learn or whether they learn anything on these courses is another matter altogether and the number of days doesn’t have anything to do, in my view, with the quality of what has been learnt.’

‘That’s the kind of way in which the league tables are drawn up. I’d like you to reflect for a moment on what this accomplishes. Does it say anything about the authentic quality of learning and of teaching, which is in the relationship, the interaction, between people in a classroom? I think not. I think it says absolutely nothing about authentic quality. What it is is a system, a procedure, that assures counterfeit or bogus quality, not through anybody being deceitful or being stupid, but simply because this is the kind of procedure that has been set up, this is the kind of game you have got to play.’

‘What I’ve been trying to suggest to you is quite a simple point. If we look at the history of thought to try to understand what it is we’ve now come to believe, there’s a big problem in how we think about ourselves and about organisations. There are other ways, ways that resonate more with my experience, anyway, that we might think about ourselves and our institutions. There are big implications for how we think about control, how we think about management, how we think about knowledge, and hence my claim that it’s impossible to manage knowledge because knowledge emerges in the interactions between us.’

The impossibility of managing knowledge
Ralph Stacey, Hertfordshire University Business School

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