A Critical Review of the Essay "Inner Development for Organizations" (v2)

Applying the Cynefin-Estuarine Framework as an Analytical Lens

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Prefatory note

This text is an experiment in applying a particular set of analytical concepts to examine a document from a perspective that is very different from the one in which it was written. The document under review is "Inner Development for Organizations: The Change Leader's Handbook in Building Collective Capabilities for Global Challenges", by Claude [AI] and Thomas Jordan, posted on the website idg.thomasjordan.se.

The analytical lens applied here is drawn from the body of work developed by Dave Snowden and associates over two decades, including the Cynefin framework, Estuarine Mapping, SenseMaker methodology, and the broader programme sometimes called "naturalising sensemaking." As a shorthand, this collection of concepts, forming something like a social ontology, will be called "the Cynefin-Estuarine framework" below. Key sources include Snowden's chapter "As Through a Glass Darkly" in the Handbook of Futures Studies (2024) and various publications from The Cynefin Co.

The author of this review—Claude, an AI language model, with mentoring by Thomas Jordan—does not claim to represent Snowden's views, to speak from within the Cynefin-Estaurine practitioner community, or to predict what Snowden or his associates would say about the IDG paper. This is explicitly an external application of concepts, not an internal representation of a tradition. The interpretation offered here may or may not align with how practitioners of these methods would actually analyse the IDG framework. Any misleading interpretations in applying these concepts are the author's responsibility and should not be attributed to Snowden, The Cynefin Co, or the broader community of practitioners.

The purpose of the exercise is to see what questions and critiques emerge when an organisational development document is examined through a complexity-theoretic lens that differs substantially from the developmental and systemic assumptions common in the IDG initiative. The value lies in the friction between perspectives—what the Cynefin-Estuarine framework illuminates that might otherwise remain invisible, and what tensions it reveals in the IDG approach.

Throughout the text, formulations like "the Cynefin-Estuarine framework would suggest" or "from this perspective" are used to indicate that a claim follows from applying these concepts—not that the author speaks with authority on behalf of the tradition from which the concepts are drawn.

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The IDG for Organizations paper addresses a genuine need: organisations working on sustainability and social justice require new capabilities. The question this review explores is whether the approach outlined in the paper is coherent with what complexity science suggests about how change happens in human systems.

1. The category error at the heart of the enterprise

The document opens with an evocative story of "GreenFuture" and Maria's frustration when her systems thinking training encounters unchanged organisational structures. This is a valid observation. The proposed solution, however, may commit precisely the error it claims to address.

The authors correctly identify that "individual development, however powerful, cannot overcome organisational systems that work against it." They then proceed to outline a systematic, linear approach to changing those systems—a "theory of change" with four levels (individual, team, organisational, cultural), timeframes neatly specified (3–6 months for quick wins, 2–5 years for cultural transformation, 5–10 years for developmental stage shifts), and governance patterns to be "implemented."

Viewed through a Cynefin-Estuarine lens, this represents the same thinking that produced the problem, applied at a higher level of abstraction.

The fundamental category error, as the Cynefin-Estuarine framework might characterise it, is treating an anthro-complex system as if it were merely complicated. In a complicated system—an aircraft engine, a surgical procedure—one can indeed design optimal structures, specify implementation sequences, and predict outcomes from interventions. In a complex adaptive system characterised by emergence, non-linear causality, and the constant interplay of human intention, identity, and intelligence, one cannot.

The document acknowledges complexity in its rhetoric ("multidimensional, nonlinear, emergent, messy and complex") while its methodology remains resolutely Newtonian. In Snowden's terminology, this might be described as a cargo cult: the forms of complexity-awareness without the substance.

2. The problem of the "unifying language"

Throughout the document, there is enthusiasm for creating "shared language" and "unifying frameworks." The IDG's 25 skills are positioned as a common lexicon that will enable cross-sector conversation and coordinated action.

From a Cynefin-Estuarine perspective, this represents a potential misunderstanding of how meaning operates in human systems.

Shared language can become shared blindness. When everyone uses the same framework, they pattern-match to that framework. The 17% who might see the gorilla—Snowden's reference to those whose different cognitive patterns allow them to perceive what others miss—are systematically filtered out or socialised into conformity. A competency framework, however well-intentioned, risks creating:

1. **Checklist compliance:** "We've done the 25 skills"
2. **Premature convergence:** The framework becomes a Procrustean bed onto which all phenomena must be fitted
3. **Status marking:** "Developed people" versus "undeveloped people"—a potentially insidious moralisation of what are essentially contextual and dispositional patterns

The document notes that "complexity awareness" was renamed to "systems thinking" because respondents wanted it prominent. From this analytical perspective, this should have been a warning sign, not a validation. Labels drift toward what is legible and fashionable, not what is

enabling. The very process of consulting on framework language demonstrates how assemblage dynamics—the affective flows of what is considered legitimate discourse—modulate what can be said and thought.

A complexity-coherent approach would treat any framework explicitly as a boundary object for local interpretation, not as a standardised ontology of human development. The moment it becomes the latter, it becomes a constraint that contains rather than connects—and often contains people in precisely the patterns they need to escape.

3. The linear theory of change

Chapter 4 of the IDG paper presents what is described as a "theory of change" with four interconnected levels. The document claims this is "systemic" but from a Cynefin-Estuarine perspective it is arborescent—a tree structure that assumes knowable causality between levels.

In complex systems, as the Cynefin-Estuarine framework would have it, there is no material linear causality. The system is modulated by multiple interacting factors, and outcomes emerge from those interactions in ways that cannot be predicted from the properties of the parts. Snowden uses the metaphor of a ring of electro-magnets with multiple iron objects between them: if one magnet changes, the result can be predicted; if three change simultaneously, it cannot.

The document's theory of change assumes:

- That individual capability development produces team capability
- That team capability produces organisational systems change
- That systems change produces cultural evolution
- That these can be sequenced and measured

The Cynefin-Estuarine approach would reverse this logic. In anthro-complex systems, one does not start with "the desired future state and a plan." One starts with what is currently possible, for whom, under which constraints—then shifts the constraints (or builds constructors) through safe-to-fail experiments.

The document does mention "pilots" and "experimentation," but frames them as demonstrations of value prior to roll-out, not as evolutionary probes that may or may not scale depending on what the system permits. There is a significant difference between "test before you scale" and "probe to understand what might emerge."

4. Missing: affordance mapping and energy gradients

Perhaps the most significant absence in this document, from the perspective applied here, is any systematic approach to understanding what can actually change in a given organisational context.

In Estuarine Mapping, one creates a grid that plots the energy cost of change against time to change for constraints, constructors, and actors in the system. This produces:

1. **A counterfactual line:** Everything north-east of this line is so energy-expensive or time-consuming that it realistically will not change. This removes it from active consideration, reducing decision-making burden.
2. **A liminal zone:** Things that might change, but only through actions of those not under direct influence.

3. **A volatile zone:** Things that could change suddenly with little control.

The document's "diagnostic framework" (Chapter 3) asks sensible questions about power dynamics and organisational readiness, but it does not map affordances. It asks "where is your organisation now?" but not "what transformations are actually possible from here?"

This matters because, in the Estuarine conception, change follows energy gradients. What has the lowest energy cost is likely to prevail. If one wants "virtue" (in this case, IDG capabilities) to succeed, one must make the energy cost of virtue less than that of "sin" (old patterns). The document's governance patterns (decision registries, trade-off logs, etc.) are reasonable mechanisms, but without affordance mapping, there is no way to know which are achievable in a given context and which represent counterfactual aspirations.

The "developmental stage" framework (Amber/Orange/Green/Teal) attempts to address readiness, but it is itself a linear, arborescent model that assumes developmental progress is unidirectional and that organisations can be plotted on a single dimension. Real organisational systems are far messier: different departments at different "stages," mixed patterns, contextual variation, and crucially—no reliable causal path from one stage to another.

5. The problem of constructors

Constructor theory, as adapted from Deutsch and Marletto's work in physics for application to social systems, asks: what enables a transformation in a replicable way? A constructor can operate through passage (a ritual, a process), contagion (influence, imitation), or presence (catalytic effect).

The document's governance patterns (Appendix D) are attempts at constructors—decision registries, trade-off logs, learning cadences. These are reasonable starting points. However, the document treats them as templates to be implemented rather than as hypotheses to be tested:

> *"Start with 3–5 core principles. Document how they were applied in specific decisions. Review annually."*

From the Cynefin-Estuarine perspective, this is process design, not constructor development. A genuine constructor must be discovered in context, tested for replicability, and understood in terms of what transformation it actually enables. The document's templates assume that the same patterns will work across contexts if properly adapted. This is best-practice thinking applied to complex domains—precisely the error the Cynefin framework was designed to identify.

A more complexity-coherent approach would be to map existing constructors in each organisation (what rituals, processes, or catalytic presences already enable positive transformation?), then strengthen and adapt those rather than importing external templates. Evolution works by exaptation—repurposing existing capabilities for novel use—not by design from first principles.

6. Assemblage dynamics and narrative

Chapter 7, "The Cultural Dimension," contains the document's most promising material. The insight that "culture = repeated decisions + repeated stories" is sound. The emphasis on ritual redesign recognises that rituals can function as constructors.

However, the treatment remains instrumental. The document asks: "In your next leadership meeting, track what stories get told. What gets celebrated? What examples are cited?"

From the perspective applied here, this is observation, not assemblage mapping. It tells you what patterns exist but not their topology—how stable they are, what might destabilise them, where lines of flight are possible.

The Cynefin-Estuarine approach uses distributed ethnographic methods (such as SenseMaker) to map narrative patterns at scale, creating topographical representations that show:

- Where consensus is tight (stable attractors)
- Where patterns are loose (potential for change)
- Where adjacent clusters represent possible "lines of flight" toward different configurations

The document's cultural approach is essentially diagnostic and prescriptive: understand current culture, then redesign it. A complexity-coherent approach would be: map the attractor landscape, identify adjacent possible states, create multiple small interventions to micro-nudge the system toward more favourable states, and monitor in real-time what emerges.

7. The measurement problem

Chapter 12, "Evidence and Learning," acknowledges that traditional metrics fail for developmental transformation. It proposes a three-layer model: practice adoption, behavioural shifts, system outcomes.

This is reasonable as far as it goes, but it remains caught in the paradigm of evaluating against predetermined outcomes. The document states:

> *"Success is not achieving perfect embodiment of all IDG capabilities but rather moving consistently in the right direction."*

The questions that arise from the Cynefin-Estuarine perspective are: who determines "the right direction"? And how does one know one is moving toward it when complex systems are characterised by non-linear dynamics where apparent progress can suddenly reverse, and apparent regression may precede breakthrough?

The alternative approach suggested by this framework is different: fitness landscape mapping that shows the topography of actual states, monitored in real-time, with interventions calibrated to what the system is actually doing rather than what was hoped it would do. This requires ongoing distributed sensing—citizen/employee sensor networks that capture micro-narratives and interpret them at the point of collection—not periodic evaluation against milestones.

8. Power, but not constraint

Chapter 14, "Difficult Conversations," addresses power, privilege, and politics with unusual honesty for this genre of document. The recognition that "transformation requires redistributing power" is important, as is the acknowledgment that "not everyone benefits equally from change."

However, power is treated primarily as a political phenomenon—who benefits, who loses, whose interests are served. It is not treated as a physical phenomenon in the sense that matters for complex systems: power as constraint, power as modulation of system dynamics, power as differential capacity to change energy gradients.

In Estuarine Mapping, power shows up as asymmetric constraints: whose constraints are treated as counterfactual (unchangeable) and whose are treated as volatile (subject to change at others' convenience). Making this visible through explicit mapping changes the conversation from "whose interests should prevail" (a political contest) to "what is actually possible given constraint distributions" (a navigational challenge).

The document's approach to power remains within standard organisational development framing: acknowledge power, build coalitions, engage resistance. These are sound practices but they don't leverage the affordance-mapping methodology that would make power dynamics tractable in the way the Cynefin-Estuarine framework suggests.

9. An alternative approach

Having catalogued what the Cynefin-Estuarine framework identifies as potential problems, this section sketches what a complexity-coherent approach to organisational capability development might look like from this perspective.

Phase 1: Affordance mapping (not diagnosis)

Rather than assessing "where is your organisation now" against a developmental framework, create an Estuarine Map:

1. **Identify constraints and constructors:** What contains behaviour (rules, norms, resource allocations, structural arrangements)? What connects and enables transformation (rituals, processes, catalytic presences)?
2. **Plot on energy/time grid:** For each, assess energy cost of change and time required to change. Create the counterfactual line—what realistically cannot change regardless of intent.
3. **Map the liminal zone:** What might change, but only through actions beyond direct control? What conditions would need to shift for these to become accessible?
4. **Identify the volatile:** What could flip suddenly? These are both risks and opportunities.
5. **Document "dark modulation":** Phenomena affecting the system that cannot be attributed to known actors, constraints, or constructors. These require investigation.

The output is not a plan but a navigation chart—an understanding of what movements are possible and at what cost.

Phase 2: Assemblage topography

Using distributed ethnographic methods, map the narrative landscape:

1. **Capture micro-narratives at scale:** What stories do people tell about how things work here, what is valued, what is possible? Use self-signification (people interpret their own stories into a quantitative framework) to avoid researcher bias.
2. **Create topographical representations:** Where are tight consensus clusters (stable attractors)? Where are loose patterns (change potential)? What outliers exist that might represent weak signals of emerging alternatives?
3. **Identify lines of flight:** Adjacent attractor patterns that represent possible system reconfigurations. These become targets for micro-intervention.
4. **Monitor in real-time:** The landscape is dynamic. Set up continuous sensing rather than periodic assessment.

Phase 3: Safe-to-fail probes (not pilots)

The document's concept of "pilots" assumes that one is testing approaches before scaling them. Safe-to-fail probes, in the Cynefin sense, are different:

1. **Multiple simultaneous experiments:** Run several small interventions simultaneously, not sequentially. This creates parallel evolutionary paths.
2. **Design for detectability:** Probes must generate observable signals quickly so one can tell what's working and what isn't.
3. **Dampen failure, amplify success:** Instead of "roll out what worked in the pilot," increase investment in probes that show positive signal and reduce investment in those that don't. This is evolutionary selection, not project management.
4. **Expect failure:** Most probes will not produce the hoped-for results. This is not waste; it is learning. The goal is not to avoid failure but to fail fast, safely, and informatively.

Phase 4: Constructor development

Rather than implementing governance patterns from templates:

1. **Identify existing constructors:** What processes, rituals, or presences already reliably produce positive transformation in this specific context?
2. **Strengthen and adapt:** Work with what exists rather than importing external designs. Evolution works by exaptation—repurposing existing capabilities—not by design from scratch.
3. **Test replicability:** Does the constructor produce consistent results across different instances? What contextual factors affect its operation?
4. **Build redundancy:** Multiple constructors serving similar functions provide resilience. Don't rely on a single ritual or process.

Phase 5: Real-time decision support

Rather than periodic evaluation and strategy review:

1. **Establish human sensor networks:** Diverse panels who can provide rapid interpretation of emerging situations. Diversity for weak signal detection (the 17% who see the gorilla).
2. **Use the waggle dance:** Present data to sensor networks, gather distributed interpretation, iterate until coherence emerges. This addresses the problem of abduction—distinguishing valid intuitions from invalid ones.
3. **Monitor fitness landscapes:** Continuous tracking of how narrative patterns are shifting. Alerts when attractor stability changes significantly.
4. **Micro-adjust continuously:** Strategy as ongoing calibration rather than periodic planning.

10. What survives from the original

To be fair to the document, certain elements would survive scrutiny even from the perspective applied here:

1. **The recognition that individual training is insufficient:** This is correct and important.
2. **Attention to ritual and routine:** The insight that culture reproduces through repeated practices is sound.

3. **Acknowledgment of power dynamics:** The willingness to name redistribution as necessary is unusual and welcome.
4. **The "sponsor contract" concept:** Making leadership commitment explicit and accountable is practical wisdom.
5. **Some governance patterns:** Decision registries and trade-off logs could function as constructors if developed contextually rather than implemented as templates.
6. **Realistic timeframes:** The recognition that cultural change takes years, not months, is important.

11. Concluding observations

Viewed through the Cynefin-Estuarine lens, this document represents a common failure mode in the application of complexity thinking: acknowledging complexity in principle while defaulting to ordered-domain methods in practice. It is written with care and evident expertise in organisational development. The fictional case studies are evocative. The practical templates could be useful in contexts where the underlying assumptions happen to hold.

But the underlying assumptions are precisely what this framework questions. The document assumes:

- That desirable future states can be specified and worked toward
- That frameworks can be developed centrally and applied locally
- That developmental stages are real and linear
- That governance patterns can be templated
- That culture can be "worked on" as a distinct domain
- That transformation has identifiable phases with predictable timeframes

From a Cynefin-Estuarine perspective, each of these assumptions is problematic in complex adaptive systems characterised by emergence, non-linearity, and the irreducibility of human intelligence, identity, and intention.

The title of Dave Snowden's chapter in the Handbook of Futures Studies is "As Through a Glass Darkly"—a reference to St Paul's acknowledgment that our perception is always partial and distorted. The IDG document proceeds as if we can see clearly: as if organisational reality can be diagnosed, as if transformation can be planned, as if success can be measured against predetermined criteria.

The Cynefin-Estuarine framework suggests a different stance: we see as through a glass, darkly. What we can do is map the affordances of the present, monitor for emerging patterns, probe safe-to-fail experiments, amplify what works, dampen what doesn't, and navigate with humility through landscapes we can perceive only partially.

That would be a different document, with different tools, different timeframes, and different relationships between those who seek to help and those whose systems are the object of intervention. It would be less neat, less reassuring, and ultimately more honest about what we can and cannot know or control.

Whether this critique is fair to the IDG paper, and whether the alternative it sketches is practically viable, are questions that remain open. The purpose of this review has been to bring the two perspectives into dialogue—not to settle the matter, but to illuminate the friction between them.