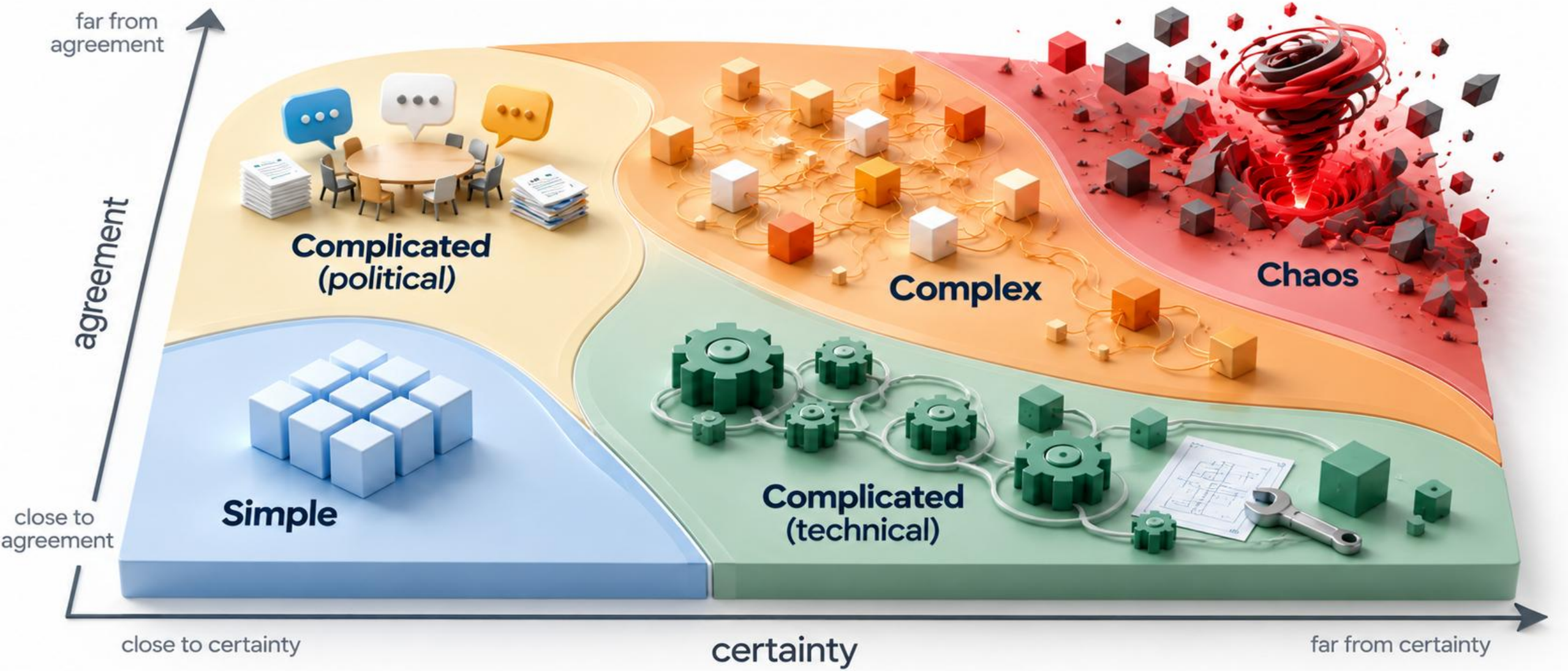
The Stacey Matrix

Understanding complexity through certainty and agreement



Based on the Stacey Matrix, developed from the work of Professor Ralph D. Stacey. Aviation security examples and visual interpretations are illustrative adaptations.

Why certainty and agreement matter

They shape how decisions are made, communicated and acted on



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Understanding the two dimensions

The Stacey Matrix considers how certainty and agreement shape the nature of a situation

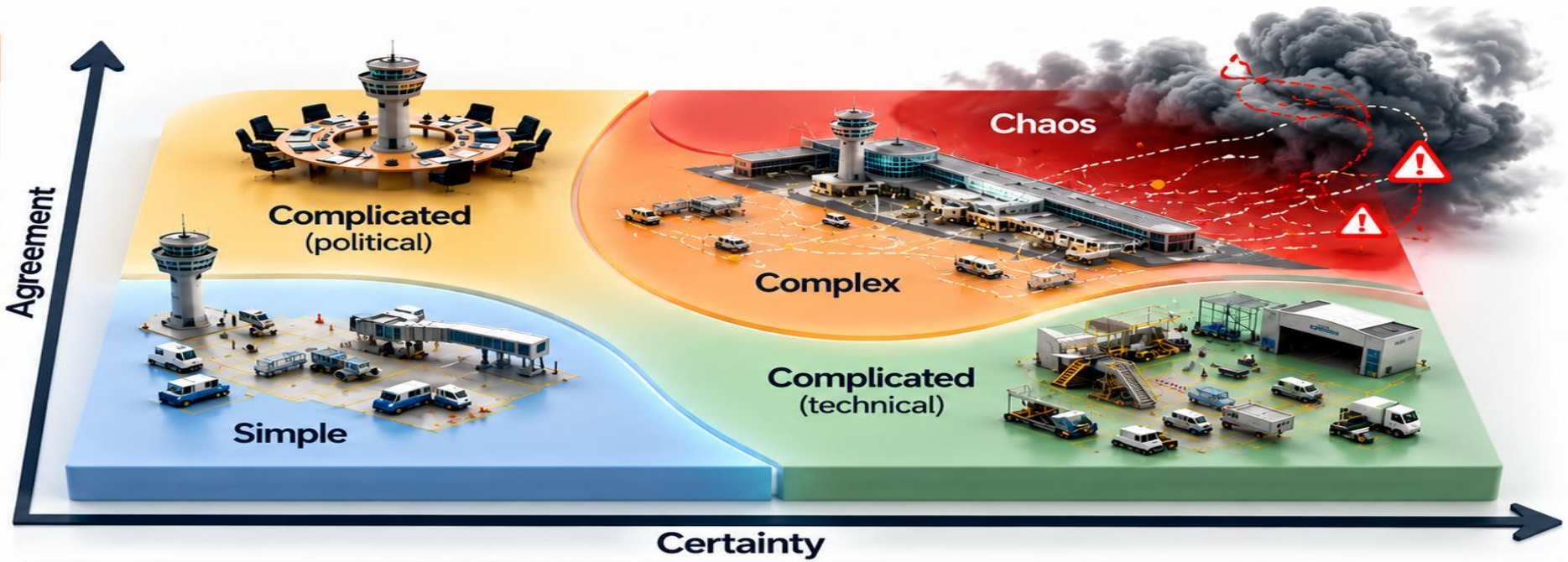
Agreement

The level of consensus about what the issue is and what should be done

Low
Different views, conflicting priorities or contested agendas

Increasing disagreement
Views start to diverge and alignment becomes more difficult

High
Shared understanding of the issue and general agreement on what to do



High
Clear cause and effect and predictable outcomes

Decreasing certainty
More variables, less predictability and outcomes are less clear

Low
Unclear cause and effect and unpredictable outcomes

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High certainty and high agreement

Clear cause and effect, established procedures and consensus



Known outcomes
Cause and effect is clear

Established approaches
Well defined procedures and standards

General agreement
Broad acceptance of how to proceed

Routine management
Use standard processes and best practice

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High certainty but low agreement

Clear information and evidence, but different views, priorities or interests



Clear evidence
Facts and information are well understood

Different perspectives
Stakeholders interpret the information differently

Competing priorities
Different organisational goals and objectives

Legitimate disagreement
Reasonable, informed and valid views

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Low certainty but high agreement

Uncertain outcomes, but a shared understanding of the issues and the need to act



Uncertain outcomes
Timing, severity and impact are unclear

Shared understanding
Stakeholders agree it is a significant issue and requires action

Coordinated response
Develop and implement contingency plans

Monitor and adapt
Keep information under review and adjust as the situation evolves

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The zone of complexity

Multiple factors interact, cause and effect are unclear, and no single solution exists



Many interacting factors
Operational, political, regulatory and external

Cause and effect unclear
Actions can have unintended consequences

No single solution
Requires exploration, adaptation and learning

Iterative approach
Test, review and adjust as the situation evolves

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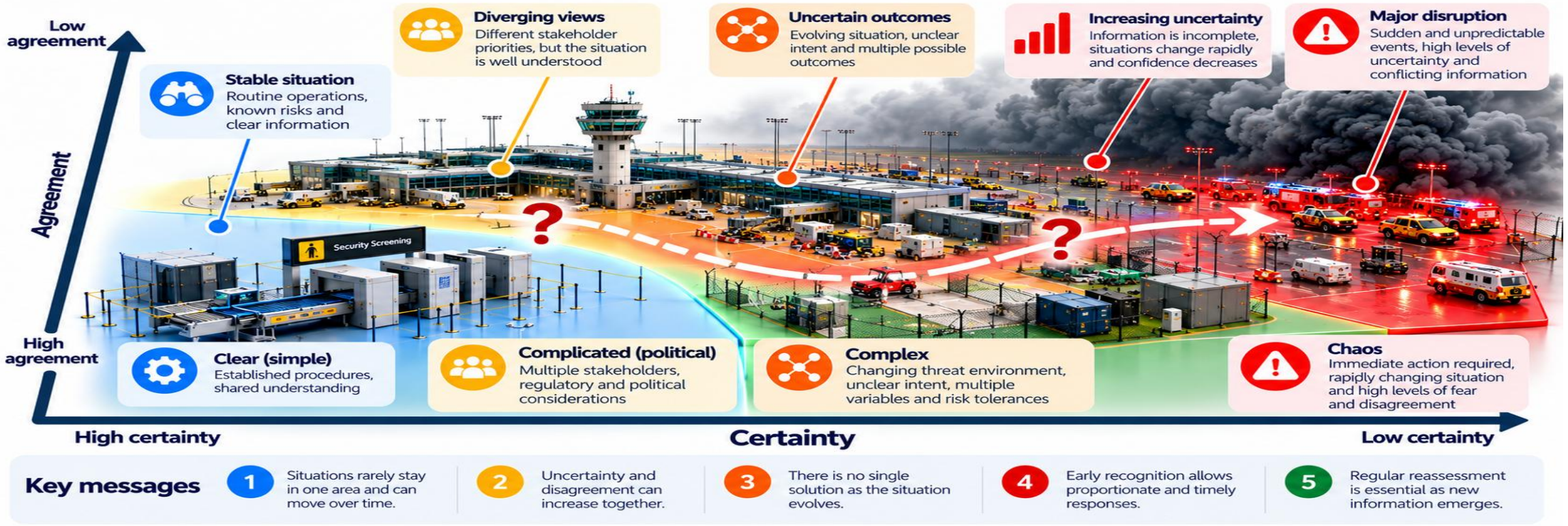
When uncertainty and disagreement escalate

Situations can move from clear to complex as uncertainty and disagreement increase



Key messages

1. Situations rarely stay in one area and can move over time.
2. Uncertainty and disagreement can increase together.
3. There is no single solution as the situation evolves.
4. Early recognition allows proportionate and timely responses.
5. Regular reassessment is essential as new information emerges.

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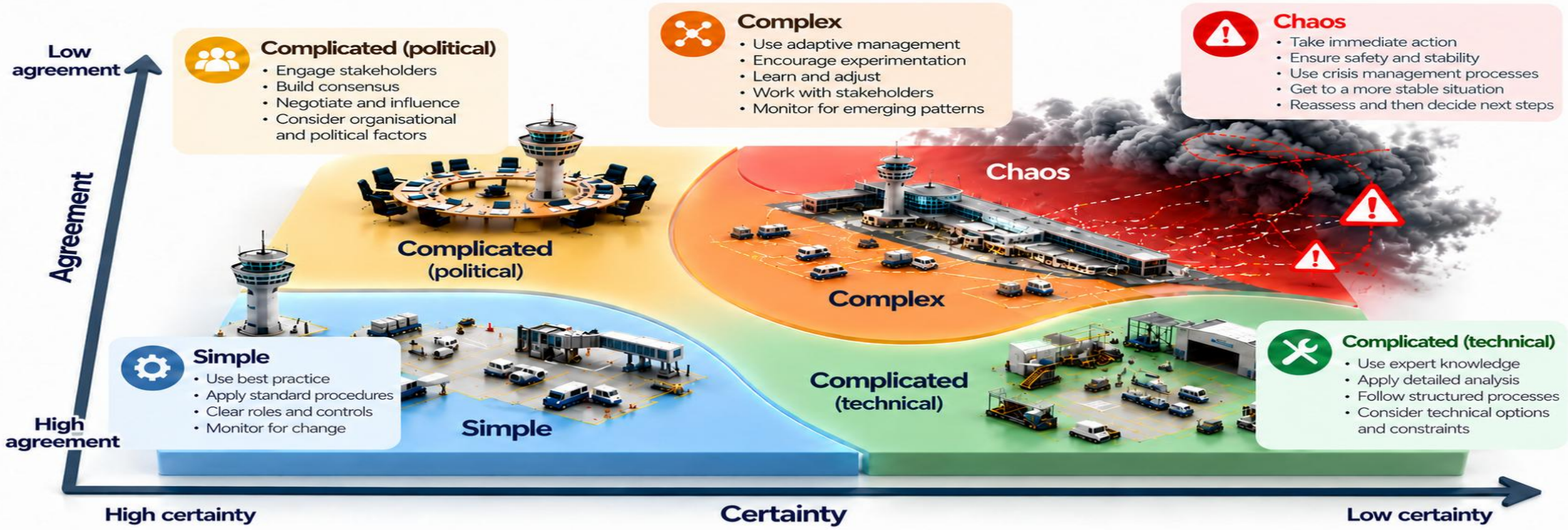
Choosing an appropriate management response

Different approaches are needed depending on the level of certainty and agreement



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Aviation security: Applying the matrix

One emerging security issue, five different management challenges



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Security culture and stakeholder disagreement

The same security issue can look different depending on the organisational priorities



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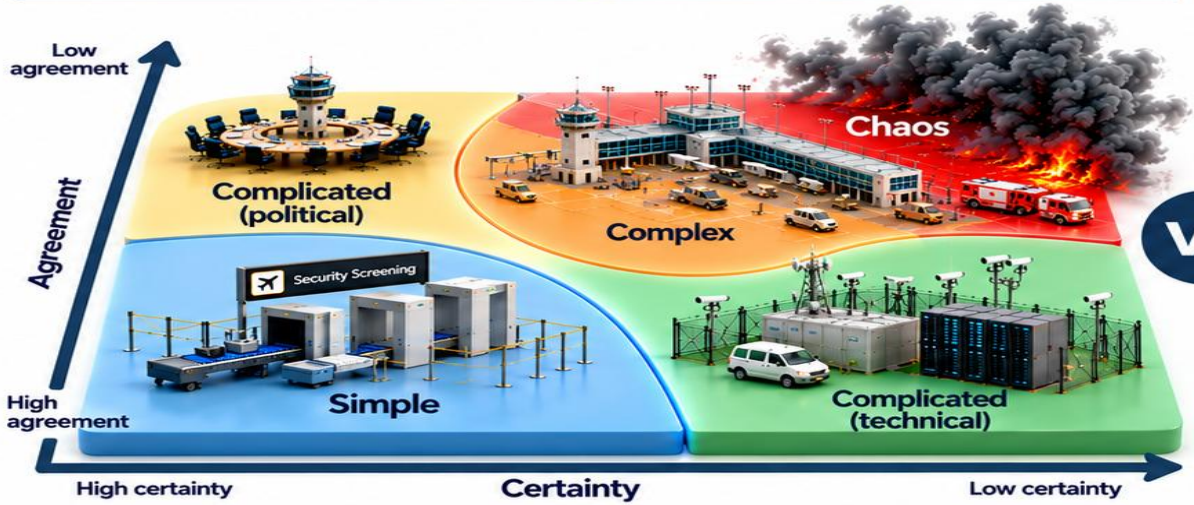
The Stacey Matrix versus Cynefin

Two complementary frameworks for understanding complexity

Stacey Matrix

Focus: Stakeholder agreement and certainty



Cynefin

Focus: Nature of the problem and decision approach

Complex
- Probe and sense
- Experiment
- Learn and adapt

Chaotic
- Act immediately
- Use simple rules
- Stabilise the situation
- Reassess



Clear
- Use best practice
- Follow procedures
- Monitor performance

Complicated
- Analyse the options
- Use specialist expertise
- Apply known solutions

VS

Key characteristics of the Stacey Matrix

- Considers stakeholder agreement
- Focuses on certainty and predictability
- Useful for understanding context and risk
- Helps identify appropriate management responses

Key characteristics of Cynefin

- Considers the nature of the problem
- Guides decision-making approaches
- Helps identify when to probe, sense, analyse or act
- Recognises that situations can move between domains

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Limitations and common misinterpretations

The Stacey Matrix is a useful guide, but it has limits and can be misunderstood



Context dependent
Boundaries between zones can be subjective and may vary by organisation, situation and time.

Not a prediction tool
It does not predict outcomes or risks, and should not be used for precise analysis or forecasting.

Can be oversimplified
Real-world situations may span multiple zones and not fit neatly into one quadrant.

Not a decision model
It helps guide the type of approach, but does not provide specific solutions or detailed methods.

Requires judgement
Accurate use depends on experience, knowledge and professional judgement.

A dynamic enviroment
Certainty and agreement can change quickly, so regular reassesement is needed.

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Key lessons and practical application

Use the Stacey Matrix to inform proportionate, context-aware responses



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