

Synopsis – OODA Book

Richards, C. (2004). *Certain to win: The strategy of John Boyd, applied to business*.
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Introduction

This book focuses on strategic thinking. Specifically how organizations function under conditions of “stress and uncertainty, and good ones shape the terms of the conflict to their liking before combat begins” (p. 14). Pre-conceived notions of how to fight a war can be manipulated by a bright protagonist to shift the advantage to one’s company. War fighters and corporate leaders do not have the luxury of a god’s eye view of the battlefield; they are condemned to operating with late, even wrong information. The concept of “blitzkrieg” or lightning war is premised on maintaining forward movement against the enemy before that enemy has time to plan or recover. One is not coping with chaos, one exploits it. In essence one demoralizes the enemy to a point that they cannot recover. The author believes that “under stress, disoriented people become demoralized, frustrated and panicked” (p. 25) and thus easily defeated.

In business, the author contends that the company that exploits competitor hesitation and mounts quicker competitive responses wins. They reduce the cycle of decision and compress action and reaction. This compression gives any firm a competitive advantage. The author believes that the philosophy espoused by John Boyd makes obvious how people “win” in war and business. For Boyd “agility” became the ability to match time and internal orientation during periods of rapid change. The author notes that business strategy traditionally takes the form of a process based “game of chess” in which moves and counter moves take place. Pre-conceived notions of “growing to competitiveness”, “portfolio management” (dogs, stars, etc.), and support “core competencies” are to be found wanting. Thus slow moving, process bound, model building tends to dominate business thinking.

Organizations become burdened by their methods of analysis. Logic, if carried to an extreme, can lock thinking to the point where actions become, in hindsight, absurd. If an organization is confined in “conventional thinking” then it must be challenged by leadership. Strategic thought is focused on staking the odds in your favor and this can be independent of size or perceived power. A key question is how do you harness the thoughts and fortitude of the individual (your employee) to your favor?

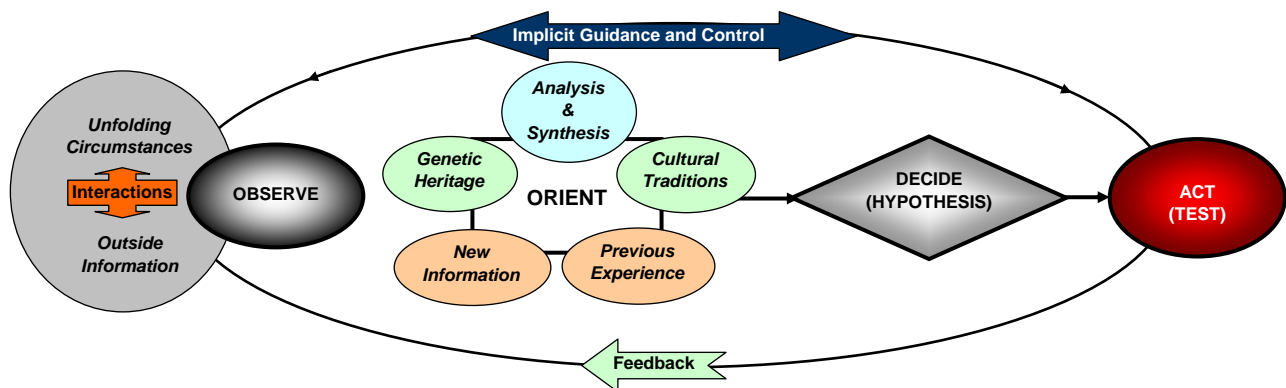
Model building and quantification of competing factors is universal. Everyone does it and thus everyone can be said to be bound by it. Process an equation and the answer becomes apparent. A key component that skews model building is the “messy” behavior of human beings. Couple this to huge complex organizational problems and if you have erroneous processes decision makers will automatically be led astray. The emergence of asymmetric warfare, in which small forces outmaneuver much larger forces, underscores the need to move beyond mere model building.

Modern warfare (blitzkrieg) is totally dependent on the ability of independent, well trained and adaptive individuals to overcome the enemy, no matter the quality of their weapons or the “élan” of their troops. This is called by Boyd “an organizational climate for operational success” (p. 51). What are the attributes of this cultural climate? They are [in my words]:

1. A climate of shared experience that builds mutual trust and fosters group cohesion.
2. The development of an intuitive feel for deciphering complex and potentially chaotic situations. This is created through rigorous training and interminable practice.
3. A sense of Mission that permeates all organizational levels. Know your mission and “empower” your subordinates to achieve it. Finally, leadership has full trust that his/her empowered subordinates will achieve it, thus freeing the leader to think beyond immediate needs.
4. A consensus bound concept that provides focus and direction. Focus means defeating an enemies’ will to fight, direction implies instituting crippling blows before they can react. (“asymmetric fast transients”...see p. 60).

OODA Loop

This term means to Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. Generally the OODA Loop can be depicted as follows:



The essence of the OODA Loop concept is to ascertain and exploit strategic advantage over an enemy before the enemy has time to react. Getting inside the enemies’ strategic “loop” requires the ability to quickly mount “abrupt, unexpected, and disorienting maneuver, much like creating and exploiting a market niche, one might say” (p. 72).

Strategy

The concept of grand strategy involves creating a vision so stirring, so “noble, so attractive that it not only attracts the uncommitted and magnifies the spirit and strength of its adherent[s], but also undermines the dedication and determination of any competitors or adversaries” (p. 65). Around this catalyst grows a determined cadre of adherents willing to sacrifice aspects of themselves to a concept of “collective” good. Passion thus drives strategic thinking and the formulation of Vision and Mission Statements.

Strategy, on the other hand, is loosely defined around a process that works to surmount obstacles that impede the successful completion of organizational goals in an evolving “world of unforeseen change and contending interests” (p. 84). One plans to achieve a discerned goal, one strategizes to create and manage those plans. The author advocates that business strategy should:

1. Maintain customer focus while reading indicators of competitive and environmental change
2. Provide a continuing stream of options to the team
3. Enable rapid switching between options
4. Encourage initiative and a creative mindset
5. Harmonize organizational efforts to achieve a “future state” envisioned in the Vision/Mission.

The key to this concept is to know what the customer wants. In essence, one maintains a competitive advantage by keeping the competition off-balance while working with your customers to find “new ways of conceiving the product or service” (p. 88). Thus successful organizations shape their marketplace to their *advantage*.

A key question in this process is how you know if your strategy is working. The author suggests as the enemy (competitor) slows down and digresses into foci centered on their internal operational climate and not on the increasingly external, evolving chaotic world you will see that your competition tends to be:

1. Always late and lacking in creative product development
2. Shifting blame
3. Dealing with high employee turnover
4. Managing by recrimination and ridged thinking
5. Cost cutting and downsizing

In essence, hubris and process thinking hamstring leadership from seeing emerging possibilities. The more complex the analysis process becomes the more it tends to turn inwardly. Reports generate meetings which in turn generate more reports. This mindset reinforces the need to defend one’s position which, inadvertently tends to extend the “loop”. The author contends that the more you extend the loop; the ever more vulnerable you become.

The author further points out that Boyd believed “intuition” is a distinct advantage. Knowing your customer at the *gut level* lets you move past the competition. This is akin to shooting at a moving target; the shooter must anticipate where the target will be in relation to where they are now and where they will be. The advantage come to she/he who rapidly adjusts to changing environmental conditions.

Culture

The organization succeeds if the level of “mutual trust” is high. The greater the level of trust in an organization; the faster OODA Loops cycle. Trust drives out fear, enhances ethical behavior, and creates a climate of mutuality that bonds people together. Trust is destroyed by; sensed injustice in power relationships (boss vs. employee), micromanaging, inconsistent (untruthful) communication, and fostering a climate of needless uncertainty.

The author cites “implicit guidance and control” (p. 109). This is the ability to sense [abductive hypothesizing...an accumulation of small hypotheses] change at a deep level and adapt before it jeopardizes the organization. Acquisition of intuition is dependent on practice [and institutional stability] that personalizes tactical decision making. In essence, what I do directly impacts organizational success. Deep training in which everyone knows what the other does, levels of management cross trained with workers, and people committed to learning from the “other”, no matter their rank or place in the organization creates this intuitive reactive environment. Leadership thus must communicate clearly intent. It must also provide feedback channels for those employees actualizing the intent in the event situational change leads the organization astray.

A key device one can use is a “mission order”. This statement can be defined as “an order to a unit to perform a mission without specifying how it is to be accomplished.” You tell the team what you, as a leader want done. Then you stand back and let them decide how to do it. This “actionable guidance” (p. 127) supports the leader’s concern over getting subordinate buy in and then maintaining project focus over time.

Goals and the process of setting them drive mission attainment. A goal can be defined as “an intention [set at a given] point in time” (p. 120). But goals can also be self limiting. What do you do if you attain your goal early? The answer is to build into the order a set of “directions” that are strategic in orientation and provide a map [my word] for moving beyond the obvious into systemic improvement. This is called “double loop learning” in adult education [my opinion].

Implementation of *schwerpunkt* (focal point or center of attack) requires that organizations constantly:

- ✓ Study it (deeply)
- ✓ Implement it throughout the culture
- ✓ Promote it [and train for it]
- ✓ Remove from the organization those who do not conform (p. 135).

Change takes time and a commitment to learn. It is extremely hard to change an organizational culture.

Applying OODA to Business

What the military can teach business is the art of shaping the “enemy mind” to your advantage. Orthodox, anticipated, well measured actions represent “cheng” (pinning forces) whereas unorthodox, unanticipated and surprising actions represent “ch’i” (maneuver forces). You need both to be successful. In business this mindset can be condensed into delivering the obvious (great gas mileage) and providing the unexpected (outstanding product quality). Proper utilization of cheng/ch’i dislocates markets and unleashes creative opportunities for change. The author also notes that if we can think this way so can the competition [they do]. What we want to actually induce in our customers behavior is “delight...and [a sense of] magic [induced] by our products” p.156).

How do you insure that your schwerpunkt is right? Simple, be the customer! Imbed yourself in what you or your competition does on the ground level. Don’t just study it, actually do it!

Summary

The OODA concept is an apt device for integrating strategic and tactical thinking into actual business practices. It is supported by the basic research cycle and emphasizes constant evaluation. I hope you find this synopsis useful.