

Agile Business is More About Manoeuvrability Than Speed

By Neil Perkin

Many leaders conflate being agile with simply moving faster. But that's far from the whole story. In this extract from my book [Building the Agile Business Through Digital Transformation](#), I explain why agile business is really all about responsiveness.

How should we think about velocity in the context of organisational agility? The best framework for understanding this comes not from a business consultant but from a military strategist. Colonel John Boyd was arguably not only one of the best fighter pilots that the American Air Force has seen, but went on to become perhaps one of the best military strategists of all time. He was a maverick who fought multiple battles with Pentagon and Military hierarchy in order to promote the application of his theories and ideas.



In the 1960s he worked with mathematician Thomas Christie to originate the Energy-Maneuverability (EM) theory of aerial combat which incorporated elements such as thrust, weight, drag and velocity into a formula that could be used to model the performance and combat capabilities of existing aircraft and even potential new fighter designs. The theory revolutionised how fighter aircraft were designed and evaluated. At the time, an ingrained design bias amongst the USAF hierarchy towards 'Bigger-Higher-Faster-Farther' meant that the Air Force was consistently building larger, heavier, multifunctional fighter aircraft with significant technical complexity. Boyd was able to use his EM theory to show that US fighters faced the very real prospect of being convincingly out-maneuvred in combat by Soviet MiGs. Instead, he and his collaborators (the so-called 'fighter mafia' who operated inside the Pentagon but challenged conventional thinking and therefore authority)

championed a new lightweight fighter concept which would eventually become the renowned F16 jet fighter.

The impact of Boyd's prescient theories has reached far beyond military strategy, and his ideas now have a sharp resonance and relevance to the modern world of business. His maxim that technology must serve its larger purpose (*'People, ideas, hardware — in that order.'*) has never been more true. When Boyd taught the Marines about his new form of warfare he preached that in battle there are always several ways to solve a problem so never to commit rigidly to just a single solution.

One of Boyd's most famous intellectual legacies is the OODA (Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action) loop, a decision-loop model designed to illustrate responses to an event. In his biography of Boyd (*'Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War'*), Robert Coram details how the maverick Colonel, who served in the Korean War, was inspired by the success rate that American F86 Sabre fighters had achieved over the Russian built MiG15 jet in the skies over North Korea (some sources peg this as an overall 'kill ratio' of around 6 MiG-15s destroyed for every F86 lost). When Boyd looked into the reasons behind situations where F86s had performed in a superior way to the MiGs, he realised that rather than this advantage coming from the F86s being faster or more heavily armed than their opposition, it was derived from their ability to manoeuvre and respond more rapidly to swiftly changing battle conditions.



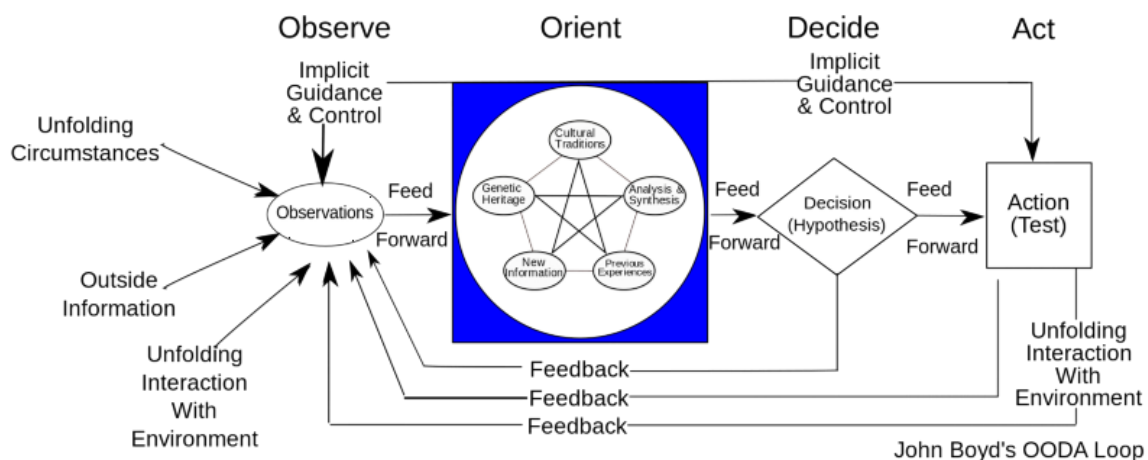
This insight, and his work on EM theory, led to Boyd developing ideas around how success and victory in rapidly changing environments (such as the battlefield) comes from the ability to make smart decisions in response to dynamic situations more quickly than your opponent. The OODA loop breaks down the decision cycle into four constituent parts:

1. **Observation** — through collection of data and information
2. **Orientation** — forming a mental perspective using analysis and synthesis. The former breaks down data or information into components that allow for deductions that

lead to understanding. The latter takes (sometimes unrelated) components and and recombines them to form a new whole. Analysis, he said, can lead to understanding but not to creativity.

3. **Decision:** based on your current mental perspective, the determination of a course of action
4. **Action:** the resultant activity informed by the decisions

Boyd believed that all intelligent organisations and organisms undergo a continuous cycle of interaction with their environment in this way, thereby enabling adaptation, but also that a key advantage can be derived not only through making smarter decisions, but by responding faster to changing situations.



In describing the OODA loop, Harry Hillaker (who worked with Boyd as the Chief Designer of the lightweight F16 fighter) said:

'Time is the dominant parameter. The pilot who goes through the OODA cycle in the shortest time prevails because his opponent is caught responding to situations that have already changed.'

Boyd's thinking effectively became the intellectual kernel for a whole new approach to warfare for the American military that favoured greater agility over scale and sheer power. It enabled a move away from hundreds of years of linear, attritional warfare strategy, and it also came to be applied in multiple contexts to support business and learning objectives. But the devil (and the true lesson for becoming an agile business) is in the detail. Rather than being thought of as a simple one-dimensional cycle where the advantage comes from being able to progress through the cycle at the fastest rate possible the real power in the OODA loop comes from the ability to use the explicit *and* implicit knowledge and abilities of those on the front line to create significant advantage through responsiveness, and to create confusion and disorientation amongst your opponent by using speed and agility to get into their decision cycle so that they are making decisions based on less up to date or relevant information. As Robert Coram describes it in the Boyd biography:

'Thinking about operating at a quicker tempo — not just moving faster — than the adversary was a new concept in waging war. Generating a rapidly changing environment — that is,

engaging in activity that is so quick it is disorienting and appears uncertain or ambiguous to the enemy — inhibits the adversary's ability to adapt and causes confusion and disorder that, in turn, causes an adversary to overreact or underreact.' (Coram, 2003)

Thus, rather than being simply about speed, it is all about tempo and manoeuvrability. As the tempo increases the officers on the ground can bypass the explicit application of the 'Orientation' and 'Decision' parts of the loop to use more implicit and intuitive understanding of a changing environment to 'Observe' and 'Act' almost simultaneously. This adaptability compresses time, enables unexpected actions to be taken by the protagonist that in turn confuse the enemy which then leads to even slower decision-making on their part, increasing the advantage even further.

One of the key notions that Boyd drew on to explain this came from the German concept of Blitzkrieg ('lightning war') warfare which involved the use of speed and surprise through concentrations of highly mobile, motorised, armoured units that could break through lines of defence and encircle potential larger enemy forces.

Blitzkrieg was all about a high operational tempo that was enabled not only through mechanised units but a form of command that empowered front-line commanders to respond faster, and was characterised by the concepts of 'Schwerpunkt' and 'Fingerspitzengefühl'. 'Schwerpunkt' (meaning the underlying goal, intent or focus of effort) gave the officers on the front-line focus, clarity of direction and objective. 'Fingerspitzengefühl' (meaning fingertip feel) enabled a level of flexibility within that for officers to make rapid, intuitive decisions on the ground in the face of fluid situations. A front-line officer would know the intent of his superior and understand the role of his unit in fulfilling that objective, but the executional detail could be far more fluid and responsive. The reduced time needed to make decisions, improved communication and use of initiative by front-line officers, better exploitation of emerging opportunities, and a dramatically increased tempo through which tactics could be changed in response to new conditions, all combined with technology (highly mobile mechanised divisions and units) to powerful effect. Central to this new way of thinking was the idea that whoever is able to handle the quickest rate of change would win. Boyd stressed that once the process begins it should only accelerate. As Coram describes it:

'Success is the greatest trap for the novice who properly implements the OODA Loop. He is so amazed at what he has done that he pauses and looks around and waits for reinforcements. But this is the time to exploit the confusion and to press on.' (Coram, 2003)

Boyd's OODA loops point the way toward a new way of working for every business. Many of today's large organisations still subscribe to the 'Bigger-Higher-Faster-Farther' philosophy that was so ingrained in the US Air Force. Responses to significant challenges are often characterised by large, expensive, complex implementations of new technology that ignore the need to be more agile. All organisations want to move quicker but true agility is about more than just speed.

As Boyd's work shows us, in rapidly changing environments advantage comes from speed of response and manoeuvrability. And that's about people, process and culture — enabling

technology to serve its wider purpose. As Boyd so succinctly expressed: '*People, ideas, hardware — in that order*'. Instead of the context of responding faster to enemy action in war, our context is the need for every business to speed up response to changing customer behaviour and need, and competitive and market context. Just like Blitzkrieg, the key to this is how we balance a clear, overarching vision, direction, and objective with the autonomy to enable more executionally oriented teams and managers to make and act on rapidly-taken, data-driven but also intuitively-led decisions in response to swiftly changing contexts. Velocity is important, but it is *the context in which it is important* that matters. Modern business advantage comes less and less from scale and more and more from manoeuvrability, or the ability to move quickly and seamlessly from one state to another.

For more like this, order your copy of [Building the Agile Business Through Digital Transformation](#)

<https://medium.com/building-the-agile-business>