



Leadership Coaching and the “Mad Major”

Raymond L. Forbes Jr.

College of Arts, Sciences and Technology
Franklin University, USA

ABSTRACT

Interested in gaining some valuable lessons for leaders and leadership coaches to add to your repertoire? Want to further express your curiosity and explore the opportunity to learn more about leadership and leadership coaching from a very unusual, non-academic and very iconoclastic source? If so, this article may be for you. This commentary is essentially the abbreviated story of a single-minded, highly dedicated leader’s lifelong quest to bring needed change to a very large narrow-minded bureaucratic organization. It will briefly explore the strategy-infused approach of one of the most controversial and little-known figures in modern military history. This individual was both celebrated and ridiculed for advocating and pursuing radical and controversial ideas, usually contrary to longstanding policies and practices. Over the course of a long career a host of nicknames were accumulated, such as: “The Sugar Plum Fairy,” Ghetto Colonel,” “Genghis John,” and, the especially derogatory, “The Mad Major.” The latter label was associated with radical oppositional stances to the prevailing military establishment on tactical aviation and the dominant approach to multi-billion-dollar weapons procurement. Additionally, the paper will offer some relevant background history, discuss important contributions to the field, provide a proven decision-making tool, and relate key ideas to a business context. It will also suggest some of the real benefits of employing the expressed creative ideas in a leadership coaching setting, as well as noting some of the latent hazards and limitations of their use.

Keywords: advocate, change agent, controversial, decision-making, leadership, leadership coaching.

INTRODUCTION

John Richard Boyd was born in the hardscrabble lake-port city of Erie, Pennsylvania, USA, in 1927. His formative years were spent in the great economic depression that began in 1929 with a major crash of the stock market. One of three children, his father died when he was a young boy. His mother struggled to raise her offspring alone while also acting as the principal family provider. His early years were unremarkable. he was an average, if indifferent, student but an exceptional athlete.

Following high school, Boyd began a military career by enlisting in the U.S. Airforce at the end of World War II. He was assigned to the allied forces occupying a small base in Japan during a frigid Winter. Perhaps as a harbinger of future confrontations with authority, he deliberately instigated his fellow enlisted airmen to burn down the flimsy, drafty and frigid wood-frame barracks they had been assigned to occupy for use as heating firewood. During his subsequent court martial, Boyd argued that the senior officers were derelict in their duty to look after the welfare of their assigned enlisted personnel. The officers on the base had been given warm

comfortable quarters in which to live and had made no effort to redress the enlisted personnel living conditions. After the presentation of arguments, and Boyd's passionate testimony, the charges against the wrongdoers were summarily dismissed.

Establishing a Reputation

After completing his overseas enlistment, Boyd enrolled in the University of Iowa and joined the Air Force Reserve Officers Training program to help offset the cost of his college education. After completing his undergraduate studies, Boyd was commissioned as a junior officer and assigned to flight training. Tactical flying proved to be his forte, in a long career as a fighter pilot he offered an open challenge to all comers.

Over the years, Boyd took on all competitors and remained undefeated in air-to-air combat. He routinely bested superior pilots from all the services as well as foreign pilots undergoing Air Force flight training. Sure of his skill as a fighter-pilot, Boyd had a standing offer, betting he could defeat any challenger in single combat within 40 seconds. If he lost, he would pay the challenger forty dollars. This earned him the tag of "40 seconds Boyd." True to his word, despite many encounters over the years, he never lost a mid-air contest, often overcoming his opponent in 20 seconds or less.

Career Challenges

Boyd spent an almost 50-year career with the U. S. Air Force both as an active-duty officer and as a civilian contractor. During that time he became revered by a few and castigated by many. As a freelancer for the Pentagon he accepted only minimal compensation; one day's pay for every two weeks worked. Consistent with his extreme work ethic, he chose a monk-like, Spartan lifestyle. Against the entrenched bureaucracy he was viewed as a dangerous and unpredictable adversary. He remained a combative and polarizing figure throughout his entire professional tenure. Boyd was known for relishing direct confrontation, being rock-sure of his facts and highly confident in presenting his ideas and opinions.

Much to the chagrin of his immediate superiors, he was utterly unafraid of antagonizing generals, senior officials, and highly compensated civilian contractors. Boyd often candidly challenged them all verbally, standing toe-to-toe with cigar in hand. His verbal tirade was usually accentuated by a finger repeatedly pushed into their chests. Part of his effectiveness as a speaker was due to extensive practice, his command of the facts and his meticulous subject research. Over the years, many Senior Pentagon officials, and members of Congress also got the full Boyd treatment. They typically experienced his direct, personal, colorful language, laser-focused, vocal onslaught first-hand, nose-to-nose.

Orientation Toward Education

Despite having earned two undergraduate degrees, one in economics from the University of Iowa and one in engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology, he was perpetually dissatisfied intellectually. Boyd developed an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and was largely self-taught, spending a considerable amount of his evening hours throughout his life reading and studying. During his 70-year lifetime, among other subjects, he extensively and intensively delved into advanced mathematics, computer science, education, history, philosophy, psychology, theoretical physics, brain science, and aerodynamics,

Boyd also proposed controversial approaches to developing and applying strategy [1] while lecturing at prestigious civilian and military advanced education courses. He was also a superb, if unconventional, non-traditional leader and developer of his followers. Eventually, he surrounded himself with a cadre of true believers who shared his views and became known collectively as the “Fighter Mafia.”

CONTEXT OF BOYD’S WORK

Considered by numerous traditional thinkers to be something of a maverick, many of Boyd’s best ideas were actually adapted from his extensive reading. Examples include: the use of active deception from the ancient Chinese strategy master, Sun Tzu [2]; arranging things to assure a good outcome from legendary Japanese swordsman Musashi Miyamoto [3]; and, the concept of entropy, or the tendency of closed systems to move gradually toward disorder from the brilliant Czech logician Kurt Godel [4].

Another significant literary influence on Boyd’s thinking, derived from his rigorous academic inquiry, was adopted from theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. The principle noted that when considering two related properties, the more accurately one property is measured, the less accurately the other property can be known. [5].

Boyd also found practical application for the second law of thermodynamics developed by mathematician Rudolph Clausius [6]. This principle concerns heat or energy transfer and introduces the idea of entropy, or the notion that in any closed system the total amount of disorder tends to increase over time. The second law was particularly important to Boyd’s thinking about how to create useful tactics. decisions and strategy.

In his study of military history, Boyd specifically investigated reflections of Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, and the practice of lightning-fast warfare from the German Army’s use of blitzkrieg during World War II [7]. He was also intrigued by the mobility and speed of American General George Patton’s forces during the second world war. Boyd even went as far as interviewing former German tank commanders about their experiences. He also readily incorporated features from unconventional or insurgent warfare into his thinking. This included notions derived from examining the dramatic escapades of historical figures like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Hannibal and Napoleon.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

During his later career Boyd was honored with many awards and citations from both within and without the military for his innovative thinking. In particular, his discovery of critical aircraft design factors also offered the promise of higher combat effectiveness coupled with lower initial costs as well as reduced subsequent maintenance and support requirements. Unfortunately, promoting these ideas earned him many powerful enemies and ran directly against the long-standing hierarchical acquisition dictum of bigger, faster, higher, and more technically sophisticated. Boyd’s extensive grasp of the concrete facts and solid research findings, coupled with a facility to creatively display them graphically, made him a formidable foe to the existing hierarchy. His stubborn intransigence [8] also embroiled him on the wrong side of long-standing controversies.

Later in life, in a determined attempt to better understand his own thinking, Boyd penned one of his few written works, "Destruction and Creation." The nine-page article ranged widely over multiple subject matter. [9], In it, he emphasized the importance of synthesis thinking or gaining understanding by making connections broadly across multiple disciplines, as opposed to analysis, which enables understanding by deconstructing or reducing to the lowest element. Boyd thought that synthesis was the essential basis for creativity. Further, he believed that the most important leadership priorities should be: people first, ideas second, and technology third. Strategically, Boyd's thinking influenced the concept of maneuver warfare used extensively during the Iraq war and as doctrine by the U.S. Marine Corps, Boyd came to believe that personal success involved choosing a life path that either focused on getting ahead (promotability) or one engaged with doing something important regardless of the personal penalties incurred (contribution). Accordingly, one of the major negative personal costs to his life was the direct result of prioritizing his work over his family life. He deliberately and consciously chose the doing path and, like a magnet, attracted followers who had made the same personal life choice. Instead of looking for continued career advancement, Boyd wanted to always do what he felt was the right thing to do regardless of the personal consequences,

BOYD AND BUSINESS

Boyd's wide research interests also included business [10]. He was fascinated by the novel and innovative approach used by Toyota in the production of its automobiles [11]. The Toyota production system was based on speed and featured just-in-time delivery of component parts as well as the extensive use of actual work teams to identify and implement improvement ideas. Management guru Tom Peters' thinking was closely aligned with that of Boyd. Peters latest book *Reimagine* [12] contains several sections on Boyd and his work. Stalk and Hout's work *Competing Against Time* [13] also discusses the efficacy of the Boyd's decision process and time-based competition in business. Additionally, Gary Klein's work *Intuition at Work* [14] closely parallels Boyd's belief that intuitive methods are an integral part of successful strategy making.

APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

As a matter of principle, Boyd ardently disagreed with most of the traditional notions of top-down, command and control styles of leadership. He strongly opposed the "do as I say, not as I do," "we have always done it this way", and other highly directive styles of leadership. His wide personal experience, discussions with leading authorities, and extensive reading taught him that really effective leaders assess, distinguish, and mold what needs to be done [15]. Therefore, the most successful leaders adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves. They behave flexibly and allow for modifications to plans and purposes as situations change. Boyd also believed that the best leaders establish trusting relationships with their people, make their intentions clear, communicate in easy to understand language, and are open to influence from those below them.

Additionally, Boyd held that effectual leaders reward competence, innovation and learning from failure. In his view, good leaders highly value direct knowing, and take deliberate steps to learn the actual situational conditions in "the trenches", where the "rubber meets the road" or what the military calls the "ground truth." Based on what they learn, coupled with what they already know, leaders can then make the best possible decision under the prevailing circumstances. Ultimately, Boyd believed that the most effective leaders chose professionalism over careerism.

USEFUL APPLICATIONS FOR THE LEADERSHIP COACH

Perhaps the most widely known and most frequently used of Boyd's ideas is the OODA loop [16]. The loop consists of four interrelated stages: Observe, Orient, Decide and Act. Boyd believed that once the process had begun it must not slow but continue and accelerate. Loop stages applied to Leadership Coaching are:

Observe

This involves gathering of information about the coachee's surroundings, current performance, and mindset. Observation occurs through active listening, asking open-ended questions, and carefully noting nonverbal cues. This process enables the coach to gain an understanding of the leader's current challenges, strengths, and possible areas for growth. The use of tools like active listening and feedback assessments or 360-degree reviews can be helpful in broadening the depth and scope of observations.

Orient

The orientation element involves interpreting and synthesizing the information gathered in the first phase. The leadership coach needs to filter this information through their own knowledge, experience, and values in order to gain a better grasp of the underlying issues. This is where emotional intelligence plays a critical role. Coaches may need to adapt their coaching style somewhat based on what they have learned about the coachee's motivations, beliefs, and learning styles. Boyd believed this was the most critical of the four stages and is most closely associated with establishing meaningful context. At this juncture, thoughtful reflection on the coachee's prior actions, background, beliefs, and experiences can be used as a lens to better understand their behavior and guide coaching strategy. Relevant sub-factors include: cultural traditions, analysis and synthesis, prior experiences, new information, and genetic heritage.

Decide

In this phase, the coach chooses a helpful course of action or coaching strategy from among the identified options. Possibilities include: collaboration in setting goals, offering options or alternative courses of action, assistance in creating action plans, and determining which feedback or guidance will likely be most impactful. The most important thing is to enable a decision that is timely and relevant to the coachee's situation while, at the same time, being sufficiently flexible to adjust if necessary.

Act

Coaches now implement their coaching strategy. This might involve giving specific feedback, thinking through possible reactions of those most affected, guiding the coachee in executing a plan, giving a relevant homework assignment, or providing ongoing support and accountability. The coach should remain open and agile, continuously monitoring the coachee's progress and being ready to re-enter the OODA Loop if circumstances change. The central idea is that the OODA

ADVANTAGES IN APPLYING THE OODA LOOP TO LEADERSHIP COACHING

Better Decision-Making:

The OODA Loop fosters a cycle of constant learning and adjusting. Continuous improvements lead to enhancing both the coach and client's ability to make more effective decisions. Coachees improve their own ability on learning how to learn.

Greater Adaptability:

Leaders learn to readily and rapidly adapt their coaching strategies dynamically as they receive new information or as the coachee's situation evolves. Coachees improve their ability to "adapt-on-the-fly" or innovate as conditions change.

Broader Holistic Understanding:

The shared structured framework emphasizes the need to incorporate more relevant factors and to understand not only what's happening but why it's happening. The overall effect leads to a more personalized and impactful coaching.

Significant Growth of Individuals and Teams:

By applying the OODA Loop to leadership coaching, leaders can become more effective in guiding followers and developing their teams; thus fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Collective use of the tool offers enhanced ability for practicing teamwork.

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS IN APPLYING THE OODA LOOP TO LEADERSHIP COACHING**Over-Simplification of Complex Situations**

The OODA Loop's uncomplicated structure can sometimes oversimplify the complexities inherent in leadership coaching. Real-life coaching scenarios often involve discretionary, psychological, and interpersonal factors that cannot be quickly addressed through a simple loop-based sequence. Simpler does not always mean better.

Time-Intensive Orientation

The "Orient" phase requires fusing vast amounts of information, considering context, and filtering it through the leader's experience and knowledge. For a coaching relationship, this might take longer than in typical OODA applications (such as military or emergency contexts), where split-second decisions are crucial. This can make the OODA Loop challenging to apply in fast-paced, complex coaching environments. It is also likely that the Loop will be cycled through several times in the course of issue resolution.

Favoritism in Orientation

The "Orient" phase is prone to biases stemming from the coach's own culture, experiences, perceptions, and values. This can affect the objectivity of the analysis and lead to decisions that might reflect the coach's perspectives rather than being more tailored to the coachee's needs.

Limited Focus on Long-Term Strategy

The OODA Loop emphasizes agility and quick decision-making, which can be highly effective in short-term problem-solving but may neglect long-term development strategies. Leadership coaching often requires a broader perspective on career growth, personal development, and organizational impact, which goes beyond the rapid cycles of the OODA Loop.

Human Factors

The OODA Loop is primarily an analytical and process-driven model, while leadership coaching often involves dealing with human psychological factors such as emotions, beliefs, and underlying motivations. Often, these factors resist simplification and quantification. Addressing the emotional dimensions might require methods that go beyond the basic linear structure of the OODA Loop.

SUMMARY

Research has repeatedly shown that making meaningful organizational change has proven particularly difficult to achieve from a mid-level internal position [17]. Over a long career Boyd was able to make purposeful, large scale, change in a highly entrenched military bureaucracy. His life demonstrated that making change in enduring, powerful, resistant cultures, is especially problematic and often entails personal negative consequences.

Boyd was considered by some academics to be one of the foremost military strategists of the twentieth century. He has even been favorably compared with the brilliant Prussian strategist General Carl von Clausewitz [18]. He was the only one to put time at the center of his thinking. Boyd's life and work potentially have implications far beyond the military and offer an abundance of learning prospects for the Leadership Coach. He was, in many respects, the ultimate internal change agent; a contentious, larger than life, figure whose experiences and thinking offer coaches and leaders considerable lessons in the frequently painful consequences of attempting to change rigid, well-established systems. Boyd was also something of a gifted teacher, able to explain complex ideas in simple terms, often through the use of gestures, visual aids and meaningful analogies.

Controversial while alive, John Boyd's ideas have subsequently taken root in numerous disciplines [19]. Since his death in 1997, many of his key ideas have lived on. Over the years Boyd has become something of a larger-than-life, almost mythical, figure. His many triumphs and failures throughout his career can be likened to the storied firebird, continually arising from his own ashes to live a new.

He is probably best known for his four-stage OODA decision-making model of Observe (establish what's going on), Orient (assess what it means), Decide (consider what to do about it), and Act (do something about it). While the OODA Loop offers valuable principles of agility, adaptability and continuous improvement, its application in leadership coaching must be used with care and intelligence.

Finally, this paper has reviewed key aspects of John Boyd's background and career, looked at some his key ideas on leadership, provided some useful applications of his work to leadership coaching, and covered in some detail one of his central ideas, the Observe, Orient, Decide and Act loop. Additionally, advantages and disadvantages for employing the loop in leadership coaching situations were discussed.

Leadership Coaches should use the OODA loop with care and be aware of its limitations. There can be some danger for a practitioner to get lost in tracing loops within loops. Consistent with Boyd's ideas of the value of flexibility and adaptability, coaches should adapt their coaching approach to ensure it remains effective and responsive to the unique needs of each of their coachees.

References

- [1] Ford, D. (2010). *A Vision So Noble*. Durham, NH: Warbird Books.
- [2] Tzu, S. (2018). *The Art of War*. Fingerprint Publishing.

-
- [3] Miamoto, M, (1993). *The Book of the Five Rings*. Boston: Shambala Publications.
 - [4] Wimberly, H, (2024). *Beyond Mathematics: The Metaphysics of Kurt Godel*. Independently published.
 - [5] Heisenberg, W, (2007), *Physics and Philosophy: Revolution in Modern Science*,
 - [6] Lightman, A, (2000). *Great Ideas in Physics, 3rd Ed*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
 - [7] Robinson, S, (2023). *The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War*. Exisle Publishing.
 - [8] Spinney, F. (1997). Genghis John. *U, S. Naval Institute Proceedings. Vol. 123, 7/1,133*.
 - [9] Boyd, J, (1976), *Destruction and Creation*, Unpublished paper.
 - [10] Hammond. G. (2024). *The Mind of War*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books.
 - [11] Richards, C. (2004). *Certain to Win: The Strategy of John Boyd Applied to Business*. Xlibris Corporation
 - [12] Peters, T. (2003). *Re-imagine: Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*. DK Publishing.
 - [13] Stalk, G & Hout, T, (2003). *Competing Against Time: How Time-Based Competition is Reshaping Global Markets*.
 - [14] Klein, G. (2002). *Intuition at Work: Why Developing Your Gut Will Make You Better at What You Do*. New York: Doubleday.
 - [15] Samsing, R. (2001). *Mind of Fire*. Independently published.
 - [16] Plehn, M, (2000), *Control Warfare: Inside the OODA Loop*. The War College Series.
 - [17] Gibbons, P. (2015). *The Science of Successful Organizational Change*. New York: Pearson Business.
 - [18] Clausewitz, C. (1976). *On War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,
 - [19] Coram, R. (2002). *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*. New York: Little Brown.