

John Boyd. Ace fighter pilot. Real-world, cutting-edge aircraft designer. Teacher of the already elite. Ground-breaking strategist. Antagonistic military misfit who ultimately helped change that very military.

Colonel John Boyd was a complex, fault-ridden, yet still amazing man, someone who impacted multiple spheres that he was appointed to in very unusual ways, several times while being a virtual outsider with regard to those spheres. This podcast episode—and others to follow—will relate some of the key facets of John Boyd's life, teaching, and practices that are worthy of our deep consideration. Boyd was born in 1927 and died in 1997—seven decades in the middle of the 20th century. John Boyd was a young fighter pilot who performed so well that he was then immediately assigned to instruct the top-gun-types of fighter pilots for the Air Force in the 1950s. Now that's real, powerful teaching that is the most impactful—when it is born of meaningful performance in addition to head knowledge.

In fact, early on Boyd became known as “Forty Second Boyd”—that is, forty seconds, as in two-thirds of one minute. Why? Because as an elite Air Force instructor, Boyd challenged all comers to a dog fight—that's where two fighter pilots meet in the air—only in Boyd's challenge, he himself would deliberately start out in a clearly disadvantaged position in relation to his opponent. He asserted that he would turn that disadvantaged situation around and win within forty ticks of the clock. In these simulations, Boyd reportedly never lost!

Then, in later years, this Air Force fighter pilot actually taught the US Marine Corps how to win on the ground in new ways. Now that's amazing, especially when we consider the deep, prideful rivalries among the branches of the Armed Forces in the US. Do you really think the Marines enjoyed being taught how to “do war” by an *Air Force pilot*?

Here's a cool, very helpful Boyd story for us to ponder. When teaching, Boyd would create active images of a bicycle, a speedboat, a toy tank, and a skier...and then ask the students to deconstruct those domains and then construct a new image. Apparently, few, if any, of his students would see any coherent solution. Then Boyd would lead them to the image of a snowmobile—that's right, a snowmobile—which was essentially constructed from utilizing a critical piece of each of the four original systems: handlebars from the bicycle, an engine from the motorboat, treads from the toy tank, and the ski blades from the skier!

You see, effective leaders spot commonplace items and add them in to create new combinations—just like the snowmobile was created from selected, existing functionalities. And that often requires extracting one part from another system, like the bicycle handlebars for the snowmobile. Equally important, effective leaders ignore other parts of “the bicycle” that don't fit their reconstructive needs. And notice that Boyd's example was for accessing a part—the engine—from a motorboat, not a sailboat, because the snowmobile inventor needed a motor to propel a heavy snowmobile. A sail from a sailboat would simply be inadequate, not up to the task. Eliminating wrong alternatives is just as important as choosing the strong alternatives! Just like choosing a spouse!

You know, of course, that for thousands of years, there was little real innovation in the dominant hunter and agricultural phases of humanity. Then, the industrial age emerged, and machines dramatically changed how business...and life...functioned. Now in the explosive digital age, the pace of change is exceedingly dramatic. Yes, exceedingly dramatic. And look at agriculture itself in this modern age: technological change from GPS to tech-enabled planting details has radicalized productivity and yields.

There is simply no choice for leaders nowadays: they must engage the digital world that has crowded in to literally transform key dimensions of organizations. And that's really the privilege of living in an exciting era of great change, opportunity, and prosperity. But I can hear some thinking, even now, as I speak. “Exciting? Really? I am sick of change and more change and even more change stacked on top of that!”

But, is it really true, for example, that we would prefer living as serfs hundreds of years ago under a stable but domineering feudal lord, doing the same, monotonous life-tasks that our family had done for many generations? No indoor plumbing. No electricity. And, of course, no apps and deliveries from the local pizza place! Sadly, parts of that sound a lot like socialist Venezuela, this very day! Seriously, the typical superstore shopper in America today enjoys far more quality and choice than kings and queens of bygone eras. Steaks, seafood, fresh produce, countless spices, and most magical of all, frozen popsicles!

It's really true—our era is radicalized with opportunity! And that means that every leader of organizations—small and local or large and international—must constantly examine, adapt, and adopt new ideas, new processes, new technologies, and new resources in their workplaces.

And that clearly means that unwisely clinging to inherited systems and long-proven but now-threatened ways of doing things will drag you and your workplace enterprise down into inevitable irrelevance and ultimate failure. So, the effective leader must optimistically and astutely be looking for opportunities to create cutting-edge value to match and then surpass competitors.

Here's the really good news! Leaders like you do *not* have to become inventors—that's because plenty of other companies are working very hard to get you as a leader to adopt their new snowmobile-type inventions into your workplace. Some are good...but some not so good. So *discerning* leaders do need to become innovators in embracing those truly helpful new productivity tools—new ways to streamline organizational structure by adopting technology that replaces expensive manual processes and new ways to eliminate unnecessary human tasks and elevate the levels of human activities and decision-making.

In short, to be *sustainably* competitive in the coming years, we as leaders must think like a snowmobile-builders, adopting particular new processes along with particular new tools into a fresh, new approach to serve our constituents. And we must do that constantly. This dimension of snowmobile-building leadership is a relatively recent development and is *not* an option! In fact, it's near the top of leadership *essentials*. That's because human productivity and wise stewardship of the entirety of your workplace's resources are dependent upon this snowmobile-building mindset. Discarding the outmoded. Adding and integrating the innovative. Both discarding and adding are required in the digital era!

But this important skill set doesn't naturally embed itself into a leader. In fact, my experience is that most leaders are working like mad to just be able to assimilate all the stuff already on their plates. And they are tired of—and frankly often intimidated by—increasingly complex areas of emerging technologies and processes. And, in their minds, there is little incentive to address it all today—they slide easily into Scarlett O'Hara's mindset in the movie *Gone with the Wind*: "I'll think about that tomorrow." But, unfortunately, that particular tomorrow typically never comes because of this mindset, and competitors really love that!

So here are some steps for you to be the cutting-edge snowmobile-builder in your leadership roles.

First, in addition to canvassing others, do your own real research into cutting-edge organizational technology and change. Do not delegate this—you must be the leader here. Get new "snowmobile eyes."

Second, commit to actual, robust, accountable change to your organization. And then execute just that!

Third, infect your entire leadership team and workplace with this mentality—this mindset is crucial!

John Boyd was right...for you and your particular organization! Great answers are often very findable...just not always in the ways that we are rather lazily expecting. Again, get snowmobile-eyes for your processes, your technology, and your overall service levels. Pull those blinders off and change your framework! This era will not reward the previous generation's methods. But that's just fine! This is *your* time, *your* opportunity. Grab that opportunity with snowmobile-eyes and great expectations!

