

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. Robert Coram, Boyd's primary biographer, captures his truly unique story engagingly and exquisitely.

Colonel 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 on high performance is part of a series on Boyd that follows the series opener on how to do a special form of executive innovation: building snowmobiles. Go listen to that!

In this current episode, Boyd captures our attention as a very special U.S. Air Force pilot. He not only had the deep willpower to be that kind of elite pilot, he also pushed every airplane he flew beyond the limits that were recommended by the experts. This real-world practitioner deliberately pushed the envelope, earning a key edge in knowing the true limits of his domain, not the limits set or even imagined by others.

And Boyd thought deeply about the air-to-air fighting tactics. He lived and breathed all of that virtually nonstop, sharing his strong opinions with anybody and everybody. The result was that his peers were amazed about his insights and specificity and asked him to create written teaching tools for them to study.

So the young Boyd took up the challenge of doing just that. But here's the rub. It was the belief of the official Air Force community at the time, almost universally held, that air-to-air combat was the ultimate fluid situation, something that could not be significantly documented and then taught. In other words, it was an art gleaned almost exclusively from deep experiential insights, and therefore not a science, per se.

Accordingly, Boyd's efforts were not an official project of the U.S. Air Force, mind you, but on his own time. For months, he spent his free time painstakingly documenting his experience, beliefs, and processes, then he re-challenged each and every bit of what he had documented.

When Boyd self-published his 150 pages of material, he called it "Aerial Attack Study." He asked his superior officer to send it to the Air Force agency where pilots were trained...the colonel declined, indicating a separate official study had been commissioned. Without authorization by this superior officer, Boyd sent a copy of both his study and the clearly lesser official study to the internal pilot-training agency, and in short order, Boyd's manual was adopted.

While Boyd's going around his superior understandably caused quite a kerfuffle, the big picture was this: Boyd blew the lid off the training of fighter pilots, first in the U.S. and then worldwide, forever changing the face of it all. Pilots were stunned and amazed at Boyd's framework for air-to-air fighting...it was studied far and wide, including being shared by the U.S. with its allies.

The significant popularity of Boyd's study was such that the U.S. Air Force ultimately declassified key parts of Boyd's study so that it could be read very widely. Amazingly, Boyd's core principles and practices apparently were instrumental in helping produce American air superiority for about four decades...there is no telling how many lives were preserved or saved due to American superior air power. Boyd ultimately received the highly prestigious Legion of Merit for his initiative above and beyond his call of duty.

Wow, so here are some important takeaways for us.

First, regarding air-to-air combat, Boyd was both very focused on developing the knowable "science," if you will, alongside the "art." While never ever diminishing the art of being a fighter pilot—indeed he was never defeated in air-to-air simulations, so in his time he was the very best at that art—still, he believed that ultimately clear "knowables" could be further created into a framework that worked to create the most competent, the most complete fighter pilot.

A second takeaway is this: the best artists in any particular discipline can and do choose to create the best documented framework for success for himself or herself. But Boyd selflessly did it for others, too.

Third, Boyd was simply the best because he both zealously acquired the best learning from others before him and even more zealously acquired giant doses of experiential learning. Astute practitioners who have pushed the frontier of existing knowledge, stubbed their toe, tasted success, and elegantly integrated it all...well, they'll always prevail with much, much better results than either naysayers or armchair theorists!

Fourth, and last, there may be formidable obstacles! Boyd clearly moved forward in direct contrast to acknowledged experts, including his superiors. Both theorists and practitioners alike generally believed the type of initiative Boyd was doing was pure folly. Even Boyd's direct boss, who declined to send it in for consideration, actually did not read Boyd's manual until after it had been adopted by the Air Force!

Documenting the science of a specific sphere is what high performers and good mentors do! Really, all of scientific endeavor—from biology to geology to astronomy—moves from what humanity currently “thinks” is right to what humanity then actually knows is correct! As we all move that direction, we discard a portion of the art of what we are doing and replace it with science. But interestingly, the new, expanded “science” portion only serves to change and even expand the opportunity to effectively practice the “art” portion. Beyond the hard sciences, pioneers like Boyd have exemplified this practice in heretofore unforeseen ways. Others do that too! For example, strategist Michael Porter has created several management frameworks and knowables over the years, like his well-known Five Forces, frameworks that have helped frame what many business leaders were either trying to express or trying to figure out.

In fact, integrating art with science is truly what this podcast and the entire Whitestone Forum endeavor is all about. From seminars, to book reviews, to these podcast episodes, the aim is to fruitfully mine the Word of God and Kingdom history, captured in light of highly meaningful executive experience. The goal is to create frameworks and deep, meaningful insights that move organizational leadership from a sort of “winging it, shoot from the hip” artist approach that the pre-Boyd fighter-pilot swagger embodies.

Let me give you an example. Christian leaders correctly say, “you are to be a good steward.” But years ago, when I was in a very challenging spot of executing an organizational turnaround, I was forced to ask, “a good steward for who—and how?” That's because, for a complex modern organization to succeed, there are multiple stewardships to fulfill—and that simultaneously. And God's Word very much reveals not only how to integrate that art and science but also much, much more in the way of astute organizational dynamics. Want to take a specific listen or look at this? You can find the Competing Stewardships framework both on Whitestone Podcast Episode 5 and in greater depth in the Whitestone seminar *Lasting Greatness*. That's just one example of what we do: present real-world, timeless frameworks of how to truly succeed.

While artful swagger might indeed succeed in the short term, more astute competitors will soon defeat the swaggering solo artist. No, to thrive as a top executive practitioner in a very competitive, digitized world, we must seek after the most success-supporting frameworks that we can glean. Such frameworks can and should be gathered, bolstered, and actually hyper-charged by the principles of the Kingdom of God. And the vital artist dimension, always present in high-success endeavors, can be hyper-charged by the leading of the Holy Spirit, of course. Just ask Him and heed His lead!

John Boyd got it right here. Always be the very best artist possible in the high endeavors we are privileged to be called to. But don't confuse being an artist with ignoring how key dimensions can be discovered and built into frameworks of “knowable process” for ourselves and for others. Just like in the Kingdom of God...knowables documented in God's Word, completely accessible by all Christians! Extremely relevant! Extremely vital! Extremely exciting!

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Is your workplace enterprise known for being a leader in balancing the art and science of your industry sector? Be specific.
2. Name three people you have identified as masters of the art and science of high performance. What are the key takeaways from these leaders?
3. How have you structured your personal professional development plan to constantly zero in on being the best at the art and science of high performance? Be specific.