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 "bad blockers" is part of a series on Boyd that follows several episodes about Boyd: for example, building snowmobiles…being relentlessly curious to completion… designing for stewardship…and redesigning war in the modern era. Go listen!

In this current episode, Boyd captures our attention because of his handling of the Blockers. That's "Blockers" spelled with a capital "B." The Blockers. Every enterprise of any real size has Blockers. And, boy oh boy, what a frustration some Blockers can be…for customers, employees, and even the executives who oversee vital portions of the very enterprise where Blockers often thrive. Everyone has experienced the exasperation of dealing with Blockers, over and over.

But let's start with a real positive: certain Blockers are rightly put in place for the safety, security, and thriving of the enterprise—cybersecurity experts, for example. So, all Blockers are not bad or evil—what an impatient customer or internal worker disparages as an unnecessary obstacle may serve a vital purpose for the enterprise. But many "bad" Blockers who hurt the enterprise are self-appointed or officially backed by poor leaders. Of course, pretty much everyone who is a Blocker—whether truly a "good" Blocker or a "bad" Blocker—supposes that they are doing an essential service. Some of these "bad" Blockers enjoy the power they hold to shut down others. But others are simply fearful that the initiative of others will hurt their career or political positioning in the organization. And the quantity of "bad" Blockers seems to be expanding significantly within the bureaucracy of many organizations. In fact, it's accurate to say that Blockers are a major, very costly fact of typical daily workplace life. And, in bad times, it can get worse than ever. For example, how many times in 2020 did you hear this phrase: "Due to COVID-19, you can't…"

So, let's look at two times Boyd was involved with Blockers. *Story #1: Boyd's E-M Theory.* Officer Boyd requested significant computer time to run scenarios for developing and testing a key theory. But the civilian in charge of doling out the computer time had decided Boyd's use of computer time was not worthy. Multiple requests, all declined. So Boyd found a way to use the computer anyway. Well, Boyd's ultimate work-product that resulted, what's now called Boyd's famous E-M Theory…and that theory was utilized by the US Air Force to make many constructive changes.

Well, it was obvious that Boyd couldn't have formulated and tested his E-M theory without significant computer time. An anonymous person alleged Boyd stole $1 million of computer time from the government, something that could cost Boyd everything: his job, his pension, the whole banana. Accordingly, an official government Inspector General was duly appointed—and appointing an Inspector General is serious business in government circles. But operating under the presumption Boyd did use the computers, the Inspector General couldn't find a thing. Finally, the Inspector General told Boyd so, and, under agreement that Boyd wouldn't be held accountable for something the government couldn't find or prove, Boyd documented the whole story: his requests from the Blocker, the Blocker's vetoes of his requests, and then the very fruitful use of his work product by the USAF. The Inspector General indeed reported that Boyd was not culpable, the USAF was well-served, and the civilian Blocker was at fault.

Now, that's classic: first, a Blocker empowered to stop fruitful work; second, an anonymous, disgruntled whistleblower; third, the rule-breaker like Boyd threatened with career-ending consequences even though his breaking the rule was highly fruitful for the organization; and a search for the guilty by an appointed authority. Now that's an expensive, stressful Blocker-initiated event that actually ended well

for Boyd. But how many others are intimidated into not doing the right thing because of Blockers and their ability to force consequences like an Inspector General investigation? How many times does a would-be initiator of breaking rules simply give up because the rules are too formidable, or the consequences are just too forbidding. This is an all-too-common hidden cost of allowing "bad" Blockers, and then fostering or even rewarding them. And talk about dampening the human spirit of innovation!

Now, story #2: The Bradley. One of Boyd's disciples named Jim Burton became nationally-known as he challenged the Army's testing of the Bradley personnel carrier—an Army tank. The Army essentially wanted the Bradley badly and ran a testing process that the military inspector Burton wasn't buying. So Burton soon became a thorn in the side of key people in the Pentagon weapons-procurement establishment. Boyd was a veteran of such battles and tutored Burton as to three guiding principles.

First, Burton could never be wrong on any technical point, anytime, ever. If he was, his essential aura of competence would be breached. Second, Burton must attack the testing process, not the important product itself. Why? This would work to keep the focus on saving American soldiers' lives, taking the moral high ground. Third, Burton must not talk to the media, he must stay in the bounds of the system. Why? Because the Blockers' PR apparatus would attack Burton as "just another political hack."

When Burton's process pressed in too close for comfort, the Army orchestrated Burton's transfer to Alaska! Understandably, Burton was ready to fold his cards regarding his entire career. But then Boyd shifted gears and convinced Burton to copy his files on the project and properly send that unfavorable research and findings throughout the Pentagon, knowing full well that someone would talk to the press, leaking the findings that were unflattering to the Army. That last-ditch move revived the cause. But then a two-star general called Burton at his home. "Your work is going to save countless lives," the general told him. But the general also said his job demanded that he attack Burton publicly the next day.

By the end of this convoluted story, Burton was vindicated, and Congress heard testimony concerning the Army's sordid mess. Burton, chewed up personally by the Blockers, left military service—now that's the power of Blockers binding together to thwart reform. And that's a prime example of Blockers at work like we all have experienced…but this time with lives at stake. However, here's a twist…an epilogue with an opposing opinion. Some military observers claim reformers like Boyd and Burton were overly zealous, counting Boyd and Burton as "bad Blockers" themselves regarding key military projects. You see, whether someone is a good Blocker or a bad Blocker is often in the eyes of the beholder—including in the Bible!

Just think of the story of Esther. Haman was certainly a bad Blocker regarding the Jews in Esther's day—he wanted them all exterminated! But Haman viewed that Mordecai and Esther were actually the bad Blockers of his plans. Mordecai and Esther, however, were simply doing two things: living peaceably in the roles that God called them to steward and then standing up with boldness when a tough season arose. God ultimately honored them for their necessary good Blocker boldness! Then take the Pharisees. Jesus was a huge threat to the Pharisees' entire way of life—He seemed to be a Blocker of their religious prestige and power. And when these bad Blockers of God's will couldn't corral Jesus' followers, they played the political card, enlisting the authorities to take action against Jesus…all the way to the Cross! But, of course, Jesus rose from the dead and the bad Blockers' plans were thwarted, a real lesson for every Jesus-follower.

Now we must remember that key Blockers are rightly in place for the safety and security of those both inside and outside the enterprise. But many "bad" Blockers are actually championed by poor leaders or are often simply self-appointed, either loving the power they hold to shut down others or fearful that new initiatives will hurt their career or political positioning. So, the reality is, there are "good" Blockers and "bad" Blockers. We must have the wisdom to discern the difference and then the courage to act. So, what about you? As a leader, are you reinforcing "bad" Blockers to the serious detriment of your enterprise?

A&A: Application & Action

1. As evidenced by several of the Gospels and Epistles, a major dimension of the early church was the narrative of Pharisees vs. Jesus, then also between the circumcisers and legalists vs. Paul and his advocacy for grace. The era of the Reformation had similar conflicts. Are there current fault lines of a similar nature impacting segments of the modern Church? Be specific.

2. This is an era where companies like Amazon have dramatically impacted competitors and digital innovations have significantly altered how customers receive services and employees serve others. Amidst this rise in customer expectations, have you observed or experienced blind spots in your business or nonprofit where bad Blockers are allowed to diminish customer service, dampen employee motivation, or hinder innovation? Be specific.

3. What processes have you as a leader put in place in your enterprise that work to identify, then remove, bad Blockers from their position of authority over people and processes? How do you identify such issues (and then measure success) in solving this type of problem? Be specific.