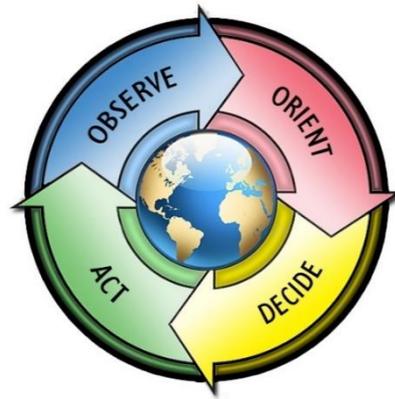


CULTURAL KSAs: Skill Development Using the OODA Loop

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The AFCLC specializes in developing Airmen’s knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in various languages, in specific cultures, and in general cultural competence. We often call the latter “cross-cultural competence.”ⁱ

Cross-cultural competence, or “3C”, is “the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then effectively act in a culturally complex environment to achieve the desired effect, without necessarily having prior exposure to a particular group, region, or language.”ⁱⁱ 3C combines all the cultural KSAs you build over time into one idea.

Improving 3C for Air Force personnel is one of AFCLC’s primary missions. We provide education, training, and educational products (like Expeditionary Culture Field Guides [INSERT HYPERLINK]) to help Airmen comprehend culturally complex environments, act more effectively in those environments, and achieve mission objectives by influencing positive outcomes.

The last part of the definition of 3C: “without necessarily having prior exposure to a particular group, region, or language,” is also worth highlighting. In order to help Airmen approach any new environment effectively, we provide general information about culture that you can apply to any cross-cultural situation. As explained above, such information consists of principles and concepts that apply to all people of all cultures. We’ll post more about general cultural knowledge in future blog entries.

For now, let’s focus on the S in KSAs, or Skills. How do you build your 3C skills? How can you improve your aptitude to take in new information, analyze it, and make decisions that are both professionally and culturally appropriate in a given environment? Do you want to be more conscious about your cultural learning? One set of skills comes with considering the OODA Loop.



John Boyd

The OODA Loop

To build Airmen's 3C skills, we often draw upon the work of Lt Col John Boyd (1927-1997). Lt Col Boyd was a fighter pilot and Department of Defense consultant, whose work is well known among military and business strategists. Over the course of his career, Lt Col Boyd developed the OODA Loop, what he called the "time competitive decision cycle."^{iiiiiv} He described the decision-making cycle as a continuous process made up of four sets of actions: OBSERVING, ORIENTING, DECIDING, and ACTING. The OODA Loop was originally conceived as a way for fighter pilots to think and respond to tactical situations more quickly than the enemy. Over the years, the OODA loop has been adopted by our sister services and the business community, because this framework and the process it teaches have proven to help people function better in very complex and fast-changing environments.^v

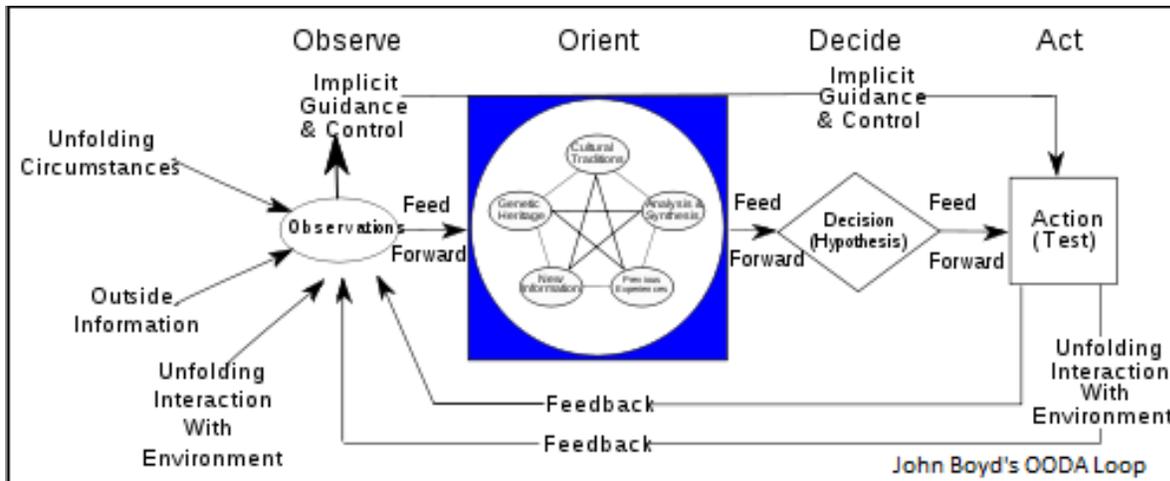


Illustration from Boyd's original work

At the AFCLC, we also relate the OODA Loop to cultural learning: to a focus on gathering, organizing, and analyzing information in every cultural context. Observing and Orienting are the methods by which we build and compare knowledge. Deciding and Acting are how we test our assumptions and assessments. We constantly and almost naturally go through this process; it's a loop, not something we do just once. However, we encourage Airmen to use the OODA Loop

to consciously *slow down* analysis and decision-making by focusing on each individual step, at least at first! Here's a closer look at each step.



Observing

The Observe part of the OODA Loop includes the following activities:

- Gathering information
- Noting the cultural landscape
- Identifying people and activities
- Reviewing the consequences of your previous actions

Observation involves concentrating your attention on the environment and gathering information through your five senses. However, people's perceptions of the information they receive depends on their own culture and experiences. We observe and perceive the world through the lens of our own cultural experiences. Such "lenses" act as filters for seeing and interpreting the world. To improve your powers of observation, think about your own culture or cultures (since we all belong to several) and what ideas seem "natural" to you. Is it natural that you cover your head when you go outside while in uniform? Why doesn't everyone do that? In a different culture, note the similarities and differences between your own behavior and that of others. Who wears hats or other head coverings and when? Ask yourself to consciously gather information about what you see and experience. Note the similarities and differences about who, what, where, and how. These activities get you on the path to keener observations.



Orienting

The Orient stage of the OODA Loop includes the following activities:

- Organizing and coordinating various pieces of information
- Comparing information to what we already know
- Making preliminary interpretations about the information
- Developing alternatives for next steps

Orienting is the stage of the OODA Loop where we make sense out of our observations.^{vi} When we orient, we categorize or organize information in a way that is useful to us. One way of doing that is comparing what you see to your past experiences, identifying what you recognize and what you don't. This process helps you establish patterns and begin to interpret what you see.

Orientation (orienting, organizing, categorizing information) depends your worldview, previous experience, and the tradition, beliefs, and values that you bring from your own culture(s). Just as with observation, we tend to orient to new information naturally. However, we encourage you to orient more mindfully, in order to achieve better interpretations. When in a new or strange culture, sometimes relying on your 'natural' observations and orientation can easily and frequently lead to an erroneous 'understanding' of what is really going on.

Finally, in the Orient stage, you develop alternative courses of action, or what you think may be useful to do next.^{vii} Please note that the OBSERVE and ORIENT stages often occur simultaneously in our minds, but they are treated as separate phases in the OODA Loop because of the different mental processes that occur.



Deciding The Decide stage of the OODA Loop includes the following activities:

- Predicting others' behavior
- Planning next steps
- Seeking further information
- Questioning assumptions and interpretations

The Orient stage of a cross-cultural experience leads to interpretations and possible alternatives. In the Decide stage of the OODA Loop, you weigh your options and interpretations and choose to move forward with one. Your decision is based on the information gathered (observing) and your understanding of the data (orienting).

You might decide how to act/react to a particular situation, what form of behavior is appropriate, and whether to pursue certain areas of interest in your conversation. On the other hand, you may decide to do nothing.

An important part of deciding is questioning your own assumptions—have you made the best judgment? Are you relying on your observations or your opinions?

One decision would be to go back through the first two stages of the OODA Loop process:

- If you need more information, or think you neglected to notice some factor, you can go back to the Observe phase.
- If you're not sure of your interpretation, you can "re-Orient" to the information, reorganizing the information in a way that makes more sense, which would result in different alternatives for decision and action.

As mentioned above, the three phases **OBSERVE**, **ORIENT** and **DECIDE** overlap and happen very quickly in your mind. However, it's useful to discuss each one as a distinct component, or step, of a process.



Acting

The Act stage of the OODA Loop includes the following activities:

- Enacting your plan
- Reviewing your decisions
- Reviewing your actions
- Reflecting on your results

As author David Ullman notes in his 2007 article about the OODA Loop, "The proof of the success of the OODA Loop is in the success of the Action taken."^{viii} However, how will you know if your action is successful? As with any exercise, you do an After Action Report (AAR), even if only to yourself. You review what you've decided and how you enacted your decision. You also reflect on what happened, how others responded, whether or not you made people more angry or diffused a situation.

Keep in mind that all of your actions affect your future observation, orientations, and decisions. If you go back a few paragraphs, you'll see that "Reviewing the consequences of your previous actions" was one of the activities in the Observe stage. Since the OODA Loop is a process, you will go through it again and again. With the experience you gain, you become a better observer and orienter, which leads to improving your decisions and actions, which altogether improve your cross-cultural competence. We encourage you to improve your own O-O-D-A skills! Check back here soon for more guidance and tips for improving your cultural and linguistic knowledge!



ⁱ This guide was developed from material written for the AFCLC's Introduction to Culture course, which is available through the Community College of the Air Force. For more information about the course, see our website:

<http://culture.af.mil>. Applying the OODA Loop concept to cultural knowledge was the original idea of Dr. Katie Gunther. The original Introduction to Culture course material was written with input and feedback from Dr. Katie Gunther, Ms. Bobbie Meyer-Piper, and Mr. Jason Scroggins. Any errors in this version are my own.

ⁱⁱ Air University. 2009. Air University Quality Enhancement Plan 2009-2014: "Cross-Culturally Competent Airmen." Revised 15 Apr 2009. P. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Boyd, John, R., The Essence of Winning and Losing, 28 June 1995. Online, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110324054054/http://www.danford.net/boyd/essence.htm> . Retrieved 30 August 2018.

^{iv} Ullman, David G. 2007. "OO-OO-OO!" the Sound of a Broken OODA Loop. Crosstalk: The Journal of Defense Software Engineering. April 2007. Online, available at:

https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/20f020_65b20dec99cb45d0bd1456ed526c09b8.pdf Retrieved 30 August 2018.

^v Spivey, Duane. 2009. The OODA Loop and Learning. Chief Learning Officer. January 2009. Pp. 30-33.

^{vi} Ullman, 2007.

^{vii} Ullman, 2007.

^{viii} Ullman, 2007, p. 6.