

The OODA Loop, and the Importance of Emotional and Cultural Intelligence in Law Enforcement

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Although the police encounter with Rodney King arguably started the public conversation about police behavior, recent events involving Kelly Thomas, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott and Laquan McDonald changed the conversation about police behavior from a local to a national arena. Recent conversation expanded to the point that it even involved the United States President, with the creation of a “Task Force” on 21st Century Policing. As a result, topics involving building trust, training and education, homeless issues, mental health awareness, crisis intervention, and communication have become commonplace topics in the law enforcement community. Although the above events began in controversy, it ultimately led to a discussion about the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as the importance of emotional and cultural intelligence and their direct application to the law enforcement community.

A positive response to the conversation surrounding modern police controversy has been the development of academic models of interpersonal communication and conflict management as they relate to law enforcement. One such model is the IMPACT model presented by Fitch (2016) in his book “Law Enforcement Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Management.” This model is an acronym for the steps involved in the process: identify and manage emotions, master the story, promote positive behavior, achieve rapport, control your response, and take perspective. As part of the process Fitch (2016) argues “people and things have no intrinsic value” and “our thinking is mostly responsible for our frustration, anger, and other negative emotions.” He then continues to present an emotional response model adapted from Clark (1998) which proceeds from an Activating Event (A), to Beliefs, Labels, and Self-Talk (B), to a final Consequence of behaviors and emotions (C).

The Clark model summarized by Fitch is possibly an oversimplification, and neglects addressing the importance of developing emotional and cultural intelligence before an activating event. Air Force Colonel John Boyd asked, “What is strategy?” and answered that it is, “A mental tapestry of changing intentions for harmonizing and focusing our efforts as a basis for realizing some aim or purpose in an

unfolding and often unforeseen world of many bewildering events and many contending interests” (Parrish, 2019). While Boyd was speaking of strategy in terms of a Vietnam era battlefield, the law enforcement landscape unquestionably involves a quest for harmony, focused efforts toward an aim or purpose, and unfolding bewildering events with contending interests. In addition to defining strategy, Boyd also developed a response model: the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) loop summarized in the diagram below.

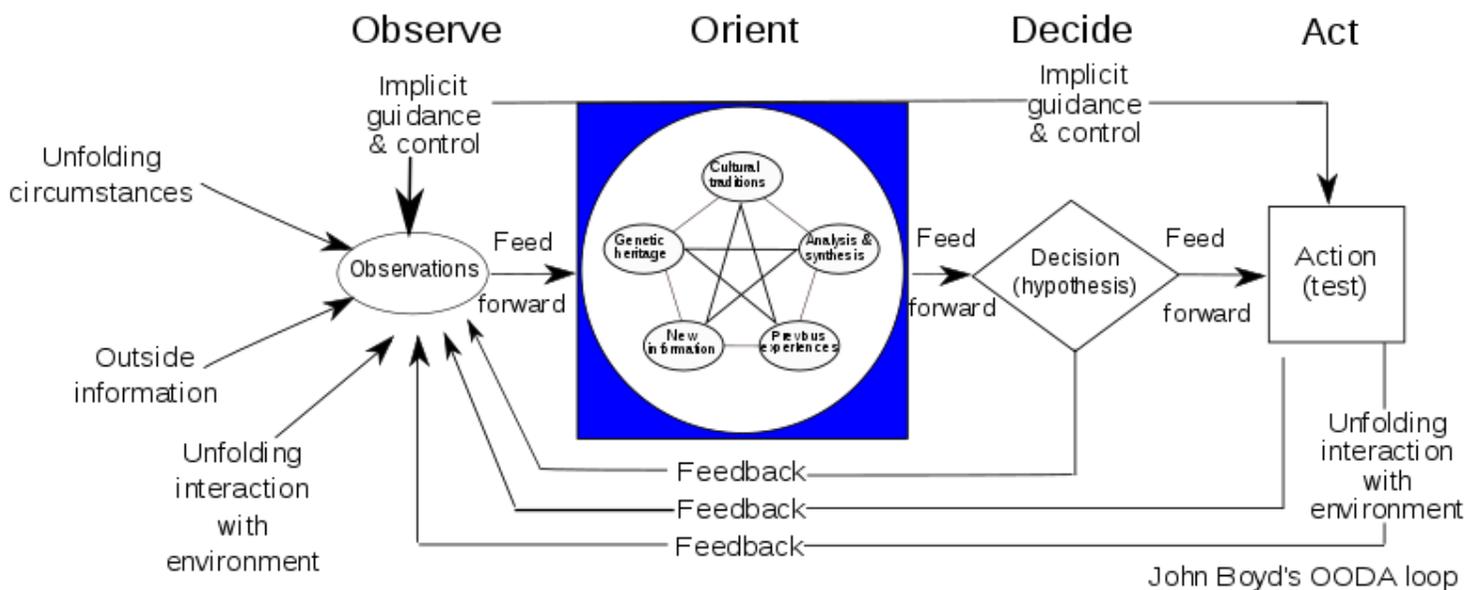


Figure 1: John Boyd's OODA loop (Boyd, 1995)

Although Boyd's OODA loop shares similarities with the Clark model, there are many key differences, the most significant of which are the considerations Boyd places on emotional and cultural intelligence. In the Orientation phase of the OODA loop, cultural traditions, genetic heritage, previous experiences, new information, are an active and interactive process which ultimately synthesize and assist in the creation of a decision, or hypothesis. Although not intuitive, the orientation phase should be considered the main emphasis, and should also include the recognition of "barriers that might interfere with the other parts of the process" because "without an awareness of these barriers, the subsequent decision cannot be a fully rational one" (Parrish, 2019).

The importance of culture, heritage, and the identification of bias in decision making are not limited to theory presented by Boyd, they are also recurring themes in the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. This report listed bias awareness, communication skills, decision making, crisis intervention, and cultural responsiveness as critical areas which require additional training to address modern national demands on law enforcement (Robinson & Ramsey, 2015). This same study also identified the need for continuous education spanning an entire career instead of merely presenting isolated blocks of information during an academy program.

Controversial circumstances surrounding events like Thomas, Brown, and Scott have similarities in that they all involved dissimilar people navigating a stressful and dynamic event: black and white, homeless and employed, drug addict and sober person, mentally ill and sane. Although historical law enforcement doctrine taught it was the obligation of the opposite party to adapt to law enforcement, modern academia teaches law enforcement has obligations to adapt to the opposite party. Best practice dictates this is not done through a linear A, B, C, methodology, but rather through continuous observations and orientation toward the problem.

In response to the issues presented in the Final Report presented by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, many agencies have adopted and mandated specialized training in the form of crisis intervention training, mental health awareness, cultural awareness, and community-based policing techniques. Although not specifically stated, these programs modify beliefs and labels, as well as increase emotional and cultural intelligence in law enforcement before an activating event. IESE (2015) pointed out the development of cultural intelligence increases relatability, tolerance, adaptability, empathy, and perceptual acuity. Empathy is related not only to cultural intelligence, but is also directly linked to emotional intelligence, which can also be developed. Golhar (2018) lists several methods for increasing emotional intelligence: assertive communication, responding instead of reacting, active listening, positive mindset and motivation, self-awareness, empathy, and leadership development.

Recent controversies surrounding law enforcement encounters changed the conversation about police behavior from a local to a national arena. Academic models involving decision making and conflict management have been adapted for everyday use in law enforcement. Best practice involves increasing emotional and cultural intelligence before an activating event for better orientation and subsequent decision making and action. Thoughts, feelings and behaviors cannot be simplified into an A, B, C, linear progression, but rather require a more complex model more like Boyd's OODA loop. Fortunately, topics involving building trust, training and education, homeless issues, mental health awareness, crisis intervention, and communication have become commonplace topics in the law enforcement community, and their study as part of lifetime learning encouraged. Hopefully with their development and refinement, law enforcement can build and maintain trust in the communities they serve.

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