

# The Bridge Between Awareness and Action

"Oh-da," they giggled, repeating the term. "Oh-da." The Dominican human rights and nongovernmental organization workers I was instructing took delight in repeating the word, which in their Spanish-inflected pronunciation rhymed with "Yoda," rather than "Buddha," as most Americans would say it. Indeed, to the uninitiated, the term in question, "OODA," sounds strange. But regardless of its pronunciation, the acronym – short for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act – is a critical component of personal security. Consciously following the OODA Loop, the bridge that connects situational awareness and action, can keep you a step ahead of an assailant and help extricate you from a tricky situation, whatever it may be.

## OODA What?

U.S. Air Force Col. John Boyd first developed the concept of OODA as a method to help his fellow pilots become more effective in dogfights. The system achieved its initial, narrow goal, shortening pilots' decision and action processes. Soon enough, people in other fields recognized the merits of OODA and began applying it in a wide variety of nonmilitary settings, including corporate decision-making and medical triage procedures. I myself believe the system is a useful tool for enhancing personal security. And though law enforcement and security officers receive the most OODA training, civilians also have much to gain by internalizing its wisdom.

As humans, we often unconsciously follow the pattern of OODA in reacting to stimuli. Making the pattern conscious, however, enables people to accelerate the process and gain an advantage on opponents who are not engaging in deliberate decision-making. Even so, in any dangerous situation, it's critical to remember that OODA is not a one-time action but a continuous loop: As an adversary reacts to your actions, you must always keep rapidly observing, orienting, deciding and acting as the situation demands.

## The System in Action

In essence, the OODA Loop is the bridge that links what we observe when practicing proper situational awareness with the actions we must take to respond to danger. The process, in fact, can describe even the decision to assume an appropriate level of situational awareness:

- Observation: I am about to walk to my car in a dark parking garage.
- Orientation: I know — from natural instinct (and, of course, from reading *On Security*) — that this is a time and place of heightened danger and that I should exercise increased situational awareness as a result.
- Decision: I am going to practice heightened situational awareness.
- Action: I watch out for danger.

I can hear some readers saying to themselves, "But if OODA is pretty much the process people use to make decisions, why must I consciously follow this flow and not simply allow it to happen organically?" The answer? By making the process a conscious one, you're less likely to explain away or deny a warning sign that you may observe. Boyd and many others since have proved that consciously following the steps of the process helps move through them more quickly – ideally faster than a would-be assailant. Getting ahead of an attacker's OODA Loop, in turn, offers a tactical advantage.

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Furthermore, consciously engaging in the OODA process can keep a potential victim from getting stuck in the insufficient, and potentially fatal, loop of merely observing or even observing and orienting. Denial and complacency can lead people to discount or ignore potential threats, sometimes with deadly consequences. Recognizing an assault and moving away from it, or "getting off the X," is critical for those under attack. OODA drives practitioners to make a decision and act on it. At times, the action may not be optimal, but the very process of doing something – anything – forces the opponent to react. Using situational awareness to observe an attack as it develops and then taking action to avoid it altogether is an even better solution, when possible. Regardless, the conscious application of OODA provides a reminder of the crucial importance of making a decision and following through on it.

The OODA concept may seem overly facile, but it is precisely this kind of simple guideline that comes in handy in a tense situation. Stress, and the fight-or-flight response it provokes, has a discernible effect on human physiology. One consequence is that blood rushes away from the brain to the limbs – often impairing rational thinking in the process. OODA is simple enough that a person can use it even under considerable duress – in an aerial dogfight, for instance, or in a confrontation with a street criminal.

## Getting Oriented

OODA's first "O," Observe, is easy to define: Think of it as practicing situational awareness. The more observant you are of your surroundings, the more likely you are to notice and react to subtle signs of danger, rather than just the obvious ones. For example, if you can spot and react to subtle clues in a person's demeanor that indicate hostile intent – instead of waiting for the person to draw a gun and point it in your face – you can avoid a problem. The "D" and "A" (Decide and Act), likewise, are easy to understand at face value.

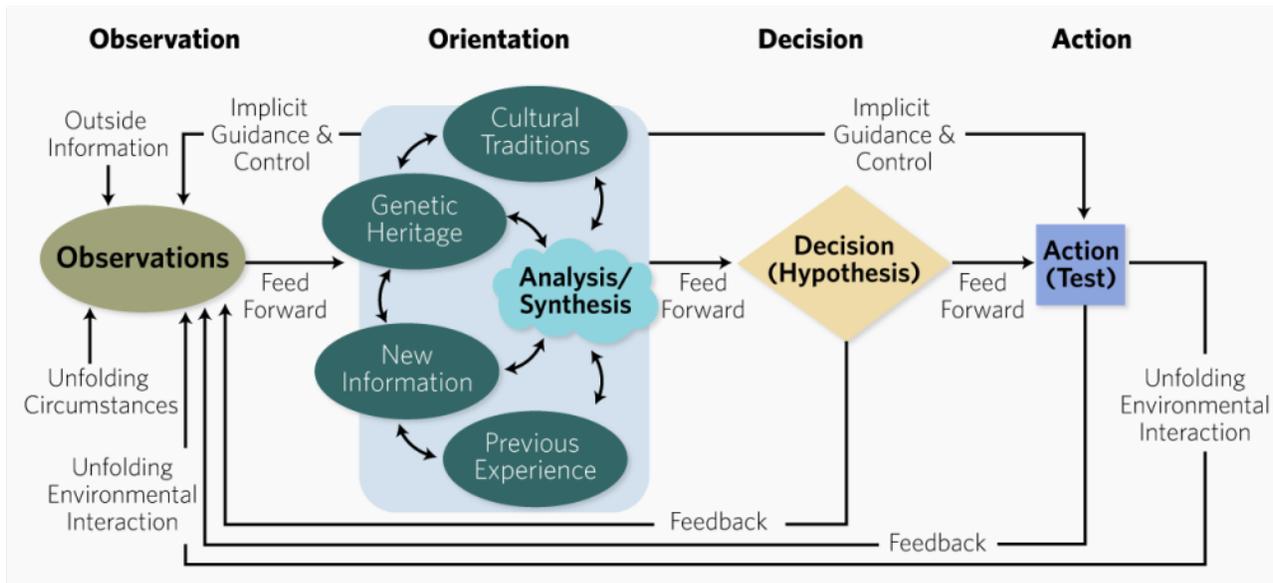
But the second "O" is a bit more complex. "Orient" doesn't mean simply heading in a particular direction as with a compass (though that may be the best course of action after observing a possible threat). Instead, orienting entails placing yourself in the proper context of unfamiliar circumstances, like a college orientation program strives to familiarize incoming students with their new environment. Orienting is the process of quickly determining where you stand in relation to other actors in an ambiguous or rapidly changing situation. And because it's where the analysis happens, it is the most critical portion of the OODA Loop. Orienting draws on a variety of factors, including education, training, experience, culture, upbringing, fears and even faith; all are filters that help put observations in context.

I was in Yemen one time investigating the first jihadist attacks against the United States. Toward the end of my trip, a Yemeni employee from the embassy took me on a brief shopping trip. As we were walking down a narrow alley, I suddenly heard a series of sharp cracks that I knew from my training and background to be fire from AK-47 assault rifles. I didn't know where the sound was coming from, but I feared that it could be a threat, so I drew my weapon and dove for the cover of a stone doorway. I had completed my first OODA loop.

As I continued the OODA process, however, new observations helped me orient myself a little better. I noted that the embassy employee was standing in the middle of the alley smiling at me. He had the cultural background to understand that Yemenis frequently crank off AK-47 rounds during weddings and could recognize from other environmental signs that we were close to such a celebration. He expected the gunfire, based on his knowledge and experience. To me, on the other hand, it was totally novel. The embassy employee's actions, or lack thereof, fed back into my observations, telling me that I had overreacted and that I could holster my weapon and go on with the important business of my shopping trip. (My wife still wears the earrings I bought her on that outing.)

### The OODA Loop

An algorithm for tactical decision making.



Source: Boyd, John R., *The Essence of Winning and Losing*

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The OODA Loop sketch above is based on a slide Boyd used in 1995 to illustrate his understanding of the process's complexity – especially the orientation stage and the various feedback loops. In addition to being a warrior, Boyd was a philosopher. He and many others have taken the OODA Loop to complicated, metaphysical levels. I'm not suggesting that he was wrong to try to map out these processes; the human brain, after all, is a complex machine. For the purposes of personal security, however, the OODA Loop's greatest strength is its simplicity, how easily it enables people to observe activity by hostile parties, analyze the information, make appropriate decisions and implement a course of action. If you consciously consider how you process your observations and understand the need to make rapid decisions and act on them, then you'll be way ahead of the competition in any situation.