

BUSINESS

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On Excellence



Advice copies Jack: Be nimble and quick

Premier football commentator John Madden calls Minnesota Vikings wide receiver Anthony Carter one of about five "impact players" in the National Football League. Such players can change the complexion of a game instantly with a heart-stopping play that demoralizes an opponent.

Carter pulled off a beauty in the Vikings' successful playoff against the Los Angeles Rams. He's speedy, to be sure. But on this play, Carter shifted directions so suddenly and decisively that he left a talented defensive back looking like a klutz.

Strategy successful in battle

Former U.S. Air Force Col. John Boyd, generally considered one of the most inventive military strategists of this century, would fancy Carter's style.

Col. Boyd, a founder of what is loosely called the Military Reform Movement, was an ace Korean War fighter pilot. He attempted in the 1950s to determine why the kill rate in Korea by our F-86, when up against the Russian-built MiG-15, was about 10 to one. Though the MiG-15 accelerated faster, climbed quicker and negotiated tighter turns, the F-86's high-powered hydraulic system allowed the plane to reverse a turn, shift and dive away or snap backward more rapidly than its opponent.

Col. Boyd concluded that this superior "transition performance" caused the enemy pilot to become increasingly disoriented, performing more and more inappropriate responses until he eventually set himself up for a kill.

He distilled his lessons into what is now commonly called the Boyd Cycle, or "OODA Loop" (for Observation, Orientation, Decision and Action).

In a two-day seminar, Col. Boyd explains that victors in battles and wars go through the OODA Loop faster than the vanquished. By "destroying the enemy's world view," winners cause losers to respond incorrectly to events.

Speed alone is not enough

But what do Anthony Carter, Col. John Boyd, OODA Loops and Sun Tzu have to do with business? Everything, perhaps.

Recently, I have been ranting and raving about the primacy of swiftiness as the basis for business strategy. Speed now is viewed by many business practitioners and theorists as the best response to turbulence in the marketplace and the chief source of future competitive advantage.

But I fear that it is the wrong choice as the principal success criterion. Maneuverability, which surely has speed as a component, is the real nub of advantage.

Consider Quad/Graphics, a \$400 million-revenue printer of magazines and catalogs, such as *Time*, *Playboy*, *Mother Jones* and *L.L. Bean*. In a recent *Success* magazine article, CEO Harry Quadracci said: "Today's successful business is fast, nimble and strikes first."

He may have startled readers when he began his list of "must do's" with "eliminate budgets," saying that "using plans and budgets is like firing a cannonball. It's fine if you are shooting at a castle.

"But markets today are moving targets. The only way to hit them is to launch your business like a cruise missile. You fire it in the general direction of your objective. Then its own information system adjusts its course as it draws near."

Quadracci's prescriptions aim to achieve nimbleness or maneuverability.

The implication of this information: Aim to become nimble, which encompasses much more than speed, so that your organization can launch winning surprise — not losing frontal — attacks.

Tom Peters is an author and syndicated columnist.