

Fast-Cycle Teamwork – what can we learn from fighter pilots?

by [Mike Richardson](#)



Our agility as an organization is being tested these days like never before, at every phase of the economic cycle – on the way into a recession, as we find bottom during a recession, on the way out of a recession and in the next phase of growth . Our emergence from recession, no matter how gradually and progressively it happens, will test our agility once again, at least if we want to exploit the opportunity to ratchet our business to the next level at the expense of our competitors. **Are you ready, willing and able?**

Fast-cycle teamwork is at the core of our [organizational agility](#), for which we need to rev up the frequency of our communication, collaboration and coordination as a team. Fighter pilots implicitly understand this, as they are trained on something called the OODA Loop:

The Fighter Pilot’s OODA Loop ([read more ...](#))

Observe:

Observing what’s going on around us, using all the senses, to be sustain our situational awareness.

Orient:

Interpreting what we are observing – what just happened, what’s happening now and, most importantly, what’s likely to happen next.

Decide:

In that context, deciding what we our options are and what we are going to do.

Act:

Acting on those decisions.

And so on, around and around – in rapidly changing circumstances the OODA Loop persists endlessly. We invest so heavily in the experiential training of our fighter pilots, so that they can progressively shrink their OODA Loop to operate inside their adversary’s OODA Loop. When heading into a dogfight, which might last as little as 40 seconds, the pilot with the smaller OODA Loop can go around theirs faster and, as a result, is more likely to get on the other pilot’s tail first.

Our problem in business is that the increasing uncertainty, turbulence and volatility of the global economy has become our number one adversary, with a rapidly shrinking OODA Loop ([What is Jim Collins Saying?](#)). If we aren’t keeping up, by shrinking our organizational OODA Loop, then we shouldn’t be surprised if we aren’t winning the daily dogfight! So, what have you done lately to massively shrink your organizational OODA Loop, to be operating inside your adversary’s OODA loop? Here’s the number one proven technique I recommend: **Hold a Morning Meeting** (or Daily Huddle at some other time of day if that works better):

- **This is a daily, rapid-fire, communication, collaboration and coordination meeting of your top team, for up to 30 minutes maximum, triaging what’s-hot and what’s-not and closing the loop on open-items from prior days.** Given the speed of business, the pace of change and the uncertainty, turbulence and volatility of things these days, managing our attention span has become much more like an ongoing, dynamic process of triage (see sidebar).
- **Fighter pilots pre-brief and de-brief every mission.** A morning meeting is your opportunity to debrief yesterday’s mission and pre-brief today’s mission, for winning the daily dogfight.
- **In his book, Death by Meeting, Patrick Lencioni recommends a daily check-in.** He breaks the myth of “too many meetings”, asserting that

<p style="text-align: center;">Triage</p> <p><u>In Crisis Management:</u> The sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients and especially battle and disaster victims according to a system of priorities designed to maximize the number of survivors; the sorting of patients (as in an emergency room) according to the urgency of their need for care.</p> <p><u>In Business:</u> The assigning of priority order to projects on the basis of where funds and other resources can be best used, are most needed, or are most likely to achieve success. (Read more ...H)</p>

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good meetings are not time-consumers but are time-savers.

- **A recent business-week article reported that Alan Mulally, CEO of Ford, holds daily meetings of his global team.** That's the CEO of a \$100+Bn corporation, holding a **daily** meeting of his global team, which has helped Ford weather the storm better than GM and Chrysler. [Week 12 Tip: Hold a Morning Meeting – just do it!](#)
- **In his book, Mastering the Rockefeller Habits, Verne Harnish recommends that every employee be in some kind of daily huddle.** He goes further and asserts that there should be a cascade of daily huddles, from senior management to frontline or vice versa. That's about having vibrant OODA loops at every level, with each informing the other.

I held a morning meeting of the executive team in every business I ever ran, at every phase of the economic cycle. It was never a popular move with the team initially, until a few days, weeks or months later, when they really started to experience and understand the benefits of our fast-cycle teamwork and revved up frequency of communication, collaboration and coordination, to win the daily dog-fight. Here are some tips I learned for effective morning meetings:

- **Same time, same place, every day, rain or shine** – if executives are on site, they are in the meeting, period, no excuses. Maximum 30 minutes, starting EXACTLY on-time and finishing on-time (or before).
- **Chaired by CEO**, with a 2nd Chair (Site GM?) and 3rd Chair (CFO?) who step-in seamlessly in case of absence, so the meeting ALWAYS happens, no exceptions.
- **Establish a running order** (Sales & Marketing VP, Projects VP, Product Development VP, Customer Service VP, CFO, Round-Robin finishing with Site GM and then CEO).
- **No written agenda or minutes.** Everyone is expected to keep up by making their own notes. Chair to sustain an open items list (I used white postcards – a new one for each issue to keep notes on commitments and agreements – clipping the deck together at the end of the meeting and hanging it on a hook in the room, so it was available to the 2nd chair and 3rd chair in case of absence)
- **It's a rapid-fire review of the deck of open-items**, commitments and agreements, without getting bogged down in anything (anything requiring more than a minute or two of update gets sidelined to be worked on today and reported back in tomorrow morning's meeting); it's not about micro-management but about breakthrough thinking and leadership (what support do you need today to get that done and what else are we not thinking about?). Done well, it batches up the myriad of huddles which would be occurring during the rest of the day, with everyone kept in synch, on the same page and in one conversation. Other huddles will still occur, as and when necessary, but many can wait for tomorrow morning's meeting, with everyone experiencing the benefit of reduced disruption and increased productivity.

Morning Meetings can be at the core of revving up your fast-cycle teamwork to keep up with the increasingly fast-cycle of business these days. Any lack of ability for our communication, collaboration and coordination to keep up hurts our execution and agility as an organization, which can cost us a fortune in avoidable costs and opportunity costs. The return on investment from something as simple and low-cost as a morning meeting can be enormous. **Try it and I believe you won't regret it – you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.** It's your daily OODA Loop to win the daily dog-fight, revving up the frequency of your communication, collaboration and coordination for fast-cycle teamwork, at the core of your agility as an organization.

As the saying goes, "when you need a friend, it's too late to make one", so I urge you to make friends with organizational agility now, before it's too late ([Making Friends with Organizational Agility](#)).

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