OODA Loops and Appreciative Administration

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Abstract

It is challenging for higher education administrators to navigate uncertainty because the effects of the uncertainty often permeate the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of all higher education constituents, including faculty, staff, and students. Higher education administrators are dealing with a wide range of uncertainties due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice issues, and more. Higher education administrators are challenged to personally reckon with their own uncertainty about how best to proceed while simultaneously helping the people they lead deal with their own uncertainty. One tool that the U.S. military has used to enhance and accelerate proactive decision-making, especially under stressful, uncertain, and ambiguous circumstances, is the OODA (Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action) loop (Révay & Líška, 2017; Von Lubitz et al., 2008; Ullman, 2007). The purpose of this article is to illustrate the synergy between OODA loops and the six phases of Appreciative Administration (Bloom & McClellan, 2016) and to propose an OODA Loop Appreciative Framework to assist higher education administrators as they navigate these uncertain times.

Keywords

Appreciative Administration; uncertainty; higher education

Today's attempts to establish a sense of normalcy for universities and students during the current pandemic find higher education administrators facing a future that is still largely unpredictable (Burns et al., 2020). Higher education administrators are seeking tools to help deal with their own personal and professional uncertainties as well as those of the people they lead. A tool that the military has used to help leaders lead in uncertain times was developed by John Boyd, a United States Navy pilot, who developed several significant military doctrines and approaches still in use today (Coram, 2002). One of the approaches he developed is the OODA loop; the OODA acronym is composed of four phases: Observation, Orientation, Decision, and Action (Luft, 2020; Brown, 2018). OODA loops have been used as a tool to enhance and accelerate decision-making, especially under stressful and ambiguous circumstances (Révay & Líška, 2017; Von Lubitz et al., 2008; Ullman, 2007). The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the OODA loops can be combined with principles of appreciative administration (Bloom & McClellan, 2016) to help higher education administrators successfully navigate the uncertainties facing higher education today.
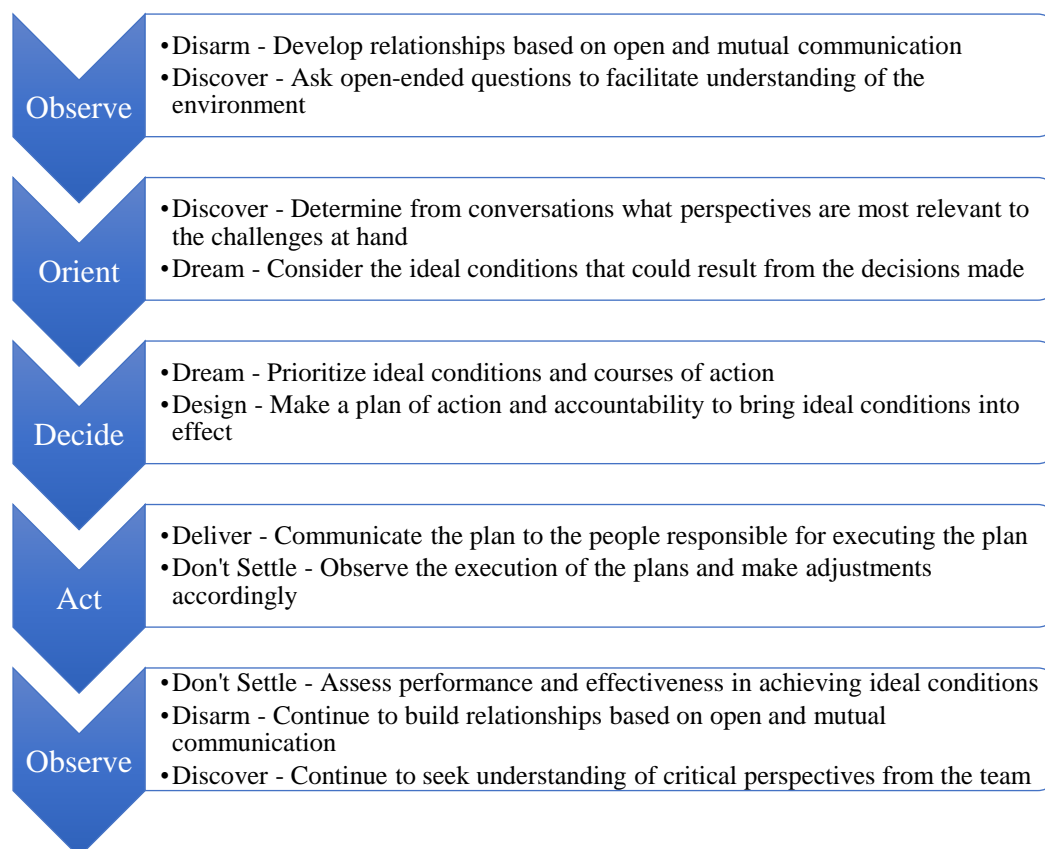
Appreciative Administration is a theory-to-practice framework for leading higher education institutions based on the six phases (Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle) of appreciative advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008; Bloom & McClellan, 2016). The Appreciative Administration framework is being used to onboard and supervise employees, lead change efforts, appreciatively assess programs, and create healthy organizational cultures. The Appreciative Administration framework provides administrators with a strengths-based approach to understanding and resolving organizational challenges. This article will highlight the overlap between the Appreciative Administration framework and OODA loops and how the proposed combined OODA Loop Appreciative Framework

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(OLAF) can help higher education administrators face challenges associated with uncertain times, including dealing with difficult unknowns about the future, poor staff performance, challenging student needs, navigating organizational change, and reacting to staff turnover and then onboarding new employees. The OODA Loop Appreciative Framework (OLAF) provides an intentional, proactive approach to decision-making, accountability, assessment, and progress towards creating better conditions. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed OODA Loop Appreciative Framework and emphasizes the synergy and overlap between the six phases of Appreciative Education and OODA Loops.

Figure 1. *OODA Loop Appreciative Framework (OLAF)*

Observe
- Disarm - Develop relationships based on open and mutual communication
- Discover - Ask open-ended questions to facilitate understanding of the environment

Orient
- Discover - Determine from conversations what perspectives are most relevant to the challenges at hand
- Dream - Consider the ideal conditions that could result from the decisions made

Decide
- Dream - Prioritize ideal conditions and courses of action
- Design - Make a plan of action and accountability to bring ideal conditions into effect

Act
- Deliver - Communicate the plan to the people responsible for executing the plan
- Don't Settle - Observe the execution of the plans and make adjustments accordingly

Observe
- Don't Settle - Assess performance and effectiveness in achieving ideal conditions
- Disarm - Continue to build relationships based on open and mutual communication
- Discover - Continue to seek understanding of critical perspectives from the team

In the Observe phase of an OODA Loop, administrators seek to understand what is happening in various aspects of their environment, such as policy changes, personnel perspectives and attitudes, and/or a host of other environmental factors. Using the Appreciative skills of Disarm and Discover, administrators build relationships based on clear communication that allow them to quickly develop an understanding of the current situation. In the Orient phase of an OODA Loop, administrators use what they have learned about their current environment and then determine what outcomes are possible and ideal for their team. Using the Appreciative skills of Discover and Dream, administrators process through possible futures with their team, considering current strengths and assets as well as desired changes to the team. In the Decide phase of an OODA Loop, administrators begin making decisions and assigning tasks to members of their team. Using the Appreciative phases of Dream and Design, administrators clarify future goals and leverage the strengths of their team members to plan for future changes. In the Act phase of an OODA Loop, administrators take action and hold members of their team accountable for achieving mutually agreed upon results. Using the Design and Deliver phases of Appreciative Administration, administrators ensure that plans for change are clearly understood and executed based on the mutually

agreed upon plans made by the team. Once an OODA Loop is fully executed, it then repeats itself in the same fashion. Using the Appreciative skills of Don't Settle and Discover, administrators continue to assess their environment and progress with their team and how well it is positioned to accomplish its purpose within the larger organization.

Two virtues of OODA loops are that they are proactive and that they keep the locus of control for action with the administrator. Proactivity is an inherent part of Appreciative Administration that is fueled by the focus on creating and maintaining open and regular communication with all stakeholders involved in the decisions being made. Being proactive facilitates intentional, rather than reactive decision-making, which in turn results in better outcomes for the team and organization. Locus of control is a very important concept for both OODA loops and Appreciative Administration because both approaches stay focused on what the individual can do at any given time. Rather than focusing solely on the consequences of others' actions that affect the team and organization, these approaches help administrators to remain action-oriented and intentional.

How to Put the OODA Loop Appreciative Framework into Action

To illustrate the use of OODA Loop Appreciative Framework (OLAF) cycles, we will consider two common administrative challenges faced by administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first challenge is supervising employees whose performance declines due to operating under uncertain working and life conditions. The second challenge is leading teams through uncertainty associated with organizational changes that impact policy and practice for the team. Although these two challenges do not constitute an exhaustive list of challenges facing administrators, they can serve as templates for how administrators might proactively and effectively lead their teams through difficult and uncertain times.

Supervising Employees with Declining Performance

Uncertain times can generate challenging conditions for staff members, both during and outside of normal work hours and conditions. For administrators, there are opportunities to work with those on their team who are struggling with these challenging circumstances to navigate the complexity and uncertainty they are facing. During the pandemic, remote working conditions were approved at many institutions to limit exposure and the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As a result, many employees found themselves working under conditions that they were not prepared to handle. The challenges presented by these new working-from-home conditions contributed to declines in productivity for a variety of reasons (Bartik et al., 2020; Brodeur et al., 2021; Staniscuaski et al., 2021).

When the pandemic closed the physical doors of most higher education institutions, our office used a series of OLAF cycles to deal with the ensuing uncertainty the enveloped our staff. First, we commenced with the Observe Phase wherein we observed the conditions and assets that were available to team members as they transitioned to remote working conditions. We engaged in disarming conversations with team members to discover prior experience and comfort with remote work as well as technology assets in their possession, such as laptops, monitors, webcams, etc. Building on these observations, we moved to the Orient phase by building on the discovery conversations with team members and began to identify ideal, future remote working conditions. Conversation topics typically included the purchase or upgrade of equipment, flexible work schedules, greater availability for student appointments outside of normal business hours, etc. We also engaged in conversations about work/life balance and how to better support each member of the team during challenging times both related and unrelated to work.

After orienting the team, we moved into the Decide phase using the outcomes of the dream conversations to design plans that would facilitate the creation of the ideal working conditions. The plans sometimes included identifying specific responsibilities for each team member together with establishing specific communication plans for us to keep in close contact with each team member. Other topics included discussions about self-evaluation and ways to stay productive as working conditions change from an office to a remote or home environment.

After making plans and assigning responsibilities, we moved to the Act phase using the design conversations and delivering on the plans. We scheduled one-on-one meetings to check in with each team member to assess how they were managing the transition to remote work. Team meetings were restructured to include time for sharing work-life balance challenges and to brainstorm ideas for providing support for emerging challenges. The team communication plan also allowed us to incorporate Don't Settle and Discover conversations as future OLAF cycles were implemented. Our administrative team continued to stay connected to the team and assessed ways to improve team productivity and working conditions together with support strategies for each member. By using OLAF cycles, we proactively and intentionally increased communication with our team, empowering them to intervene before productivity challenges emerged.

Leading During Organizational University and Change

Another challenge that can emerge during uncertain times are changes to organizational structure and reporting lines as organizations seek to streamline communication, policy, and processes (Burns et al., 2020; Mickey et al., 2020). In higher education, many institutions were mandated to close or move exclusively to remote education as a measure to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Organizational shifts occurred that affected almost every functional aspect of universities operating under these conditions (Lemoine, 2020; Oliveira, 2021). At our university, we were mandated to close our office and to implement remote working conditions. These remote working conditions were in place for fifteen months, after which we were mandated to eliminate remote working conditions by a specific date.

The transition to remote work was challenging for all involved, but the return from remote working was also challenging. As our leadership team began to think about how best to return our advising team to campus we initiated an OLAF cycle by first announcing as part of the Observe phase the date that the university had mandated for the return to our office. We held disarming team meetings and one-on-one meetings, asking questions about the team's experience with remote work, the pros and cons of working remotely, the ways they had adapted to new technologies and ways of working, and sincerely praising the work that had been done. Building on these discover conversations, we moved into the Orient phase and met as a team to dream about ways we would make the transition back to the office. We wanted to intentionally continue some of our successful new initiatives that were established during our remote work, including offering more online appointment opportunities for students, sponsoring weekly get-to-know-you activities in our Slack messaging app, etc. We also brainstormed ways our team could accommodate members of the university community who were less comfortable being in-person. These dream discussions allowed us to move into the Decide phase as we began to make plans and design ways to make the transition back to campus. There were a lot of logistical decisions that had to be made to protect the health and safety of our team. Some of these decisions included the installation of plexiglass barriers in our reception area, transfer of technology assets back into offices, and streamlining of processes to be more conscientious of a variety of student needs and perspectives regarding

the transition to in-person operations. As plans were made, we progressed into the Act phase and over the period of one week transitioned our entire operations back to the university.

The first day back on campus we welcomed the staff with breakfast foods and we had an informal check-in to see what everyone's needs were. We then connected with other university resources to update and reinstall technology that had been taken home. For several weeks, staff meetings included time for team members to discuss the transition and any ongoing challenges. It has now been four months since the transition back to the university campus. Our team still meets to discuss ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and we continue to confront organizational changes that affect our daily work with students. We also continue to use the OLAF cycles to improve our performance and our interactions with students. These OLAF cycles have empowered us to act rather than waiting for direction from senior university administrators. We have retained our ability to adapt quickly to the changes and have worked to help other offices do the same.

Conclusion

The end of the COVID-19 pandemic will not mean that uncertainty will be eradicated for higher education administrators. Administrators can use OLAF cycles to navigate future uncertainties as they occur. The three key benefits of OLAF cycles are: they are specifically designed to effect change and improvement; they involve a bias towards action; and, they leverage the strengths and assets of all those involved. As such, these cycles help to offset negative outcomes and perspectives related to change because they empower administrators and their supervisees to own their attitudes and efforts. The appreciative aspects of OLAF cycles facilitate positive responses to change that enhance the quality of communication and outcomes, thus strengthening team cohesion and trust. These cycles also promote change and the pursuit of continuous improvement efforts, which create a unity of effort and purpose for administrators and their teams. By using OLAF cycles, administrators have a tool for navigating uncertainty while also building strong relationships of support and trust with their teams. The OLAF cycles approach to dealing with uncertainty can help administrators successfully lead their teams regardless of the changes facing their work environments as we emerge from the pandemic.

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