

GUEST COLUMN – November 2023

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Extract from the newly published *The A - Z of Secondary Leadership*

Leaders lead, and some of the most visible facets of our leadership are our decisions.

We are the firefighters, called in when things need calming. We are the referees, called in when we need to take back control. We are the Avengers, arriving with a fanfare to right wrongs and ensure justice is done. And, to be fair to us, those are all valid roles for a senior leader and ones that we're generally rather good at fulfilling. When called upon to do so, we act quickly and appropriately to maintain the good order of the school.

One of the reasons why we're so good at making generally accurate decisions under extreme time pressure is that we have a solid background of experience to build on. There's a concept used to train fighter jet pilots called the OODA loop. OODA is an acronym for the four stages of the loop: observe, orientate, decide, act. The idea is that you train your brain to think only about the four stages of the loop, simplifying and speeding up complex decision-making by removing extraneous factors and distractions.

The OODA loop does the same job as a critical incident plan: when something awful happens and you're reeling from shock, just reach for the folder and follow the steps. The reason the process is described as a loop is that once you've acted, you need to begin the cycle again to see what impact, if any, your actions have had on the situation.

First, we observe: what's happening? Who is involved? What are the risks? Next, we orientate: where am I? Which way is up? Am I in control (of myself as much as anything else)? What are my options? Then, we decide what to do. Finally, we act. All this happens very quickly and if you watch a good school leader in a sharp spot, you can almost see it happening on their face. Their eyes flicker over the room, assessing the situation. They might ask short, very specific questions as they draw together the threads of a plan. Then they act. It's an impressive thing to watch. Calm, quick, decisive.

This is an excellent skill to have and one to actively develop if you're not naturally strong in it. Just follow the steps: observe, orientate, decide, act. Over time, you'll get better. As your bank of general experience in schools grows, and your bank of specific information about your school and the staff and students you work with develops, you'll be able to make rapid, accurate calls. People will welcome your unruffled decisiveness.

The reason why fighter pilots use this approach is that they work with extremely short time horizons under extreme stress. A delay in decision making could be fatal.

What's behind me? Friendly or not?

Is it about to open fire? Is there space around me to move freely?

Evasive action. Now!

But obviously they don't do that all the time, in all aspects of their life...

What's that on the doormat? A mortgage statement.

Interest rates have gone up. The monthly repayment is higher.

Property is cheaper in the North of England than the South.

Move house! Now!

...because that would be stupid.

[The A - Z of Secondary Leadership](#) is published by John Catt Education