

Flying at the Right **Altitude**



Timing Is Everything

Leadership is about anticipating and solving problems before they become issues. Leadership is also about adapting to engage and align people, priorities, and strategy. To do this effectively, leaders need to be focused on the right issues, at the right time, and from the right perspective or elevation.



Finding the Right Altitude

- Flying too low you might miss the context (lack perspective) and be unable to get to the root of the problem.
- Flying too high you might miss critical details.

The first step is to determine the right altitude for the task at hand. John Boyd, a military strategist simplifies this into the acronym OODA:



Outcome: Cultivate the awareness and agility needed to identify your ideal altitude, adapt, and expand your comfort zone.

Develop the Competence and Confidence to Operate at Different Altitudes

Amid daily demands, it can be hard to step back and take perspective. Yet, adaptive leadership requires leaders get perspective so as to really see the full picture from different angles and altitudes.

Birth - Youth

ALTITUDE: Low

0-1000 feet

Situation:

Most of youth is spent “on the ground.” With time, you learn to take perspective and develop a context for who you are, where you live, and how you operate.

Limits and Challenges:

Limited perspective; this can be an insular position.

Early Career

ALTITUDE: Close to the ground

0-10000 feet

Situation:

You have enough context to understand how your role fits into the bigger picture, but your work still primarily takes place on the ground.

Limits and Challenges:

It can be difficult to build the capacity needed to move to the next step.

Manager

ALTITUDE: Increased altitude

10000-25000 feet

Situation:

Promotions come with increased altitude but little guidance on how to navigate higher altitudes. Cautious managers will often drop to a lower altitude (go back to flying in their comfort zone) to avoid turbulence. This is temporary fix, but it will take you out of the learning zone.

Limits and Challenges:

Being a manager can feel a bit like operating without a full licence. It also comes with a lot of turbulence.

Senior Manager

ALTITUDE: Toggling between altitudes

10000-35000 feet

Situation:

As a senior manager, you're now toggling between different positions. You have more latitude, more altitude, and insight and perspective, but this can be exhausting.

Limits and Challenges:

Only some planes can fly at high altitudes. If you want to go high and toggle smoothly between different altitudes, you may need a better machine or to upgrade your skills.

Executive

ALTITUDE: Peak altitude

35000 feet +

Situation:

You're now flying at a high altitude most of the time. The higher you fly the riskier each of your decisions and moves become.

Limits and Challenges:

It can be lonely at the top; there may be no one else able to fly at your level.

Agility: Flying @ Different Altitudes

Low

Skills Needed:

- Autonomy
- Self-efficacy
- Ability to align on outcomes
- Stay focused on task

Learning Edge:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Understand how actions impact outcomes
- Pursue new opportunities

Close to the ground

Skills Needed:

- Comfort flying at different altitudes
- Agility
- Clarify expectations
- Establish success criteria for tasks

Learning Edge:

- Let go of old or limiting beliefs
- Recognize habits
- Learn to read the room and identify effective systems
- Discover how to manage outcomes

Increased altitude

Skills Needed:

- Ability to ask good questions
- Agility to identify stakeholders
- Interchange and leverage the resources
- Build greater risk tolerance

Learning Edge:

- Proactively upgrade skills
- Build comfort to adopt new strategies,
- Influence without authority

Toggling between altitudes

Skills Needed:

- Ability to manage complexity
- Lead without relying on guidance from a higher up
- Risk management and mitigation

Learning Edge:

- Upskill beyond current demands
- Manage turbulence and uncertainty
- Anticipatory problem management

Peak altitudes

Skills Needed:

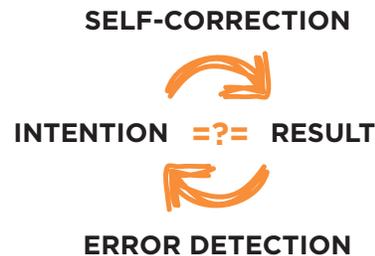
- Take alternative, diverse perspectives
- Make complex decisions
- Emergency planning
- Exit strategy

Learning Edge:

- Adopt a broad perspective and use it as your radar to make better decisions
- Invest time mentoring others
- Train and support co-pilots to take control

Double Loop Learning

Too often, people fail to achieve intended results. They continue to do the same thing harder, faster, and longer rather than reflect on which actions are helping them achieve results and have more impact.



Were you clear on intentions? Did you get the results you wanted? What can you learn? How can you adapt? How can you adjust to achieve intended results in the future?

Correction and Adaptation



Error Detection and Self-correction Are Essential



Airplanes fly off course 94% of time and yet they consistently land at the right destination. Throughout the flight, pilots check in, comparing their intentions (desired destination) and results (current location) and then self-correct for any errors (e.g., wind currents). The same is true for great leaders.

* Double Loop Learning is a concept developed by Chris Argyris.

Self-Assessment

If you feel like you're often flying at the wrong altitude, ask yourself the following questions:

Are you spending too much time down in the weeds (micro-managing direct reports' projects) and not enough time focused on high-level decision making?

 **ACTION:**

Move up to a higher altitude (get above the clouds). Focus on articulating outcomes and success criteria.

Are you struggling to build a more agile organization? Are you trying to become more responsive in today's disruptive work world and economy?

 **ACTION:**

Spend more time toggling between difficult altitudes to gain a cross-organizational perspective.

Can't get altitude?

 **ACTION:**

Explore - is it a fear of heights? Are there systemic constraints? Where are there resources or role models? How can you make small shifts upward?

Are you missing key details? Are balls being dropped?

 **ACTION:**

Move back down to a lower altitude and reorient yourself with everything happening on the ground.

Ready to Move Up?

To be at your best, it is important to fly at the right altitude. This requires we build:



Designs:

We find the right altitude through practice, adaptation and active reflection (not by chance);



Habits and systems:

Once at altitude, we can occasionally go into cruise control to recharge and rebuild bandwidth;



Proactively growth:

It's easier to build capacity before it's needed (develop comfort at new altitudes before you run into turbulence);



Awareness:

Sometimes, we need to shift altitude quickly (e.g., during an unexpected disruption, such as the one brought about by the pandemic); awareness is essential;



Accelerated agility:

We can help you learn, adapt and build capacity faster.

Ready to learn more about how to fly at higher altitudes? Visit aimleadership.com.

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