To Be or To Do

MICHAEL P. COLLINS, Author, Saving American Manufacturing

By MICHAEL P. COLLINS, Author, *Saving American Manufacturing*

I found an article in the *Smithsonian* called “The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War.” It was about John Boyd who grew up a poor boy in Erie, Pennsylvania with four other brothers and sisters, and was raised by a tough single mother.

Boyd got a college degree and joined the Air Force to become a pilot. He was a fearless pilot and flew F86 Saber Jets over North Korea. He was not happy just being a pilot; he constantly studied aerodynamics and developed new maneuvers. He became an instructor at Nellis AFB, and became the best of the best fighter pilots.

Boyd pursued his new ideas with advanced math and computers, and developed a revolutionary way to look at aircraft designs called EM or the Energy Maneuverability Theory. The theory led to a lightweight fighter design called the F-16, which is still used by the Armed Services all over the world.

Boyd’s Philosophy of Life & Work

Boyd was the ultimate individualist. He was a natural leader that had little patience with people who disagreed with him. He was blunt, direct and a super-nonconformist. He got into a lot of trouble because he was a “doer.” He was always saved from the bureaucracy, because he was always right. He was fanatical in his work habits and often worked all night.

It was known as his “To Be or To Do” speech. He was talking to his friend Leopold, who was a promising officer in the Pentagon struggling with whether or not he should blow the whistle on the corrupt B-1 Bomber Project that the Air Force brass wanted.

Boyd said, “Tiger, one day you will come to the fork in the road, and you are going to have to make a decision on which direction you want to go.” He then raised his hand and pointed, “If you go that way, you can be somebody. You will have to make compromises, and you will have to turn your back on your friends. But you will be a member of the club, and you will get promoted and you will get good assignments.”

Then Boyd raised his other hand and pointed in another direction. “Or you can go that way and you can do something -- something for your country and for your Air Force and for yourself. If you decide you want to do something, you may not get promoted and you may not get good assignments, and you certainly will not be the favorite of your superiors. But you won’t have to compromise yourself. You will be true to your friends and to yourself. And your work may make a difference.” He paused and stared at Leopold’s eyes and heart. “To be somebody or to do something.”

Boyd’s sermon is about choosing a path, choosing whom you are -- a philosophy of life and work. I think many people who work in corporations (particularly the large public corporations) may come to the Y in the road in their careers, and may need to make a decision on whether they should continue to pursue being somebody or refocus themselves on doing something.

If you are motivated to be somebody, then you must do everything possible to get promoted and rise through the ranks. The rewards include lots of money and perks, power, and being included in a very elite club. But getting there extracts a price. By nature, you have to commit to becoming a good politician and making compromises along the way.

In short, you must yield your individualism to the corporate identity. In some cases, you may have to make decisions that offend your standards of morality, or your sense of right and wrong. You are expected to show your loyalty and prove that you are a dedicated company man at all times (if you watched the British Petroleum managers issuing press releases during the Gulf oil spill, you get some idea of how tough this can be).

More importantly, you have to prove your loyalty and dedication to the very people who are already in the club, because they are the ones who will eventually vote you in or out. Getting their support is not just about performance and achievements, they also have to like you and feel comfortable with you, so it is important to get close enough to these people to understand their personalities and biases.

On the other hand, as Colonel Boyd says, you can choose to be a doer. You can focus on finding a job in the organization that is really interesting and allows you to accomplish things that bring you satisfaction. You may have to take a demotion or get stuck in your pay grade, but you will be doing interesting work and maybe even making a big contribution.

Or, you may not find a job that allows you to be a doer in the corporation, and may be forced to look outside or create your own job. The secret is knowing what interests you, or what kind of works brings you satisfaction. If you don’t know, you

may try an exercise I used many years ago. On a spreadsheet, list all of your interests down a column on the left side of screen. Then list all of your skills in the top row of the spreadsheet. Then find a quiet place to pontificate the connections between skills and interests to see if you can identify a job or some type of work that really interests you.

If you feel you are stuck in a dead-end job or are doing boring work that brings you no satisfaction, then ask your self some “off-the-wall” questions. Would you like to help other people? Would you rather work at home? Are you a frustrated artist? Do you want to be an inventor and develop your own products? Would you like to teach or train other people?

The best rationalization for being a doer is that we all have to work 30 to 40 years of our life, so why not spend most of the time doing something that is interesting? Another important factor is Boyd’s comment that if you choose to be a doer, “you won’t have to compromise yourself.” If you reject the idea “of being someone” and choose to be a doer, the chances of compromising your principles, honor, integrity and honesty are much lower.

Alan Blinder, an economist at Princeton, who makes a distinction between work that can be delivered over the wire (internet), and jobs that must be done face to face and with personal contact. Blinder says, “30 to 40 million U.S. jobs are to be potentially offshorable, ranging from scientists, mathematicians, and editors on the high end to telephone operators, clerks, and typists on the low end.” Blinder predicts a massive economic disruption that is only beginning to affect people who went to college and assumed their education prepared them for high-paying careers with lots of opportunity.

On the other hand, jobs that offer personal services to local customers, and particularly jobs that are manual are much more secure. Jobs like surgeons, artists, carpenters and motorcycle mechanics vary too much to have foreign competition, and they require special skills, circumspection and adaptability. These are truly “doer” jobs, and have the potential to be interesting and more satisfying.

Mathew Crawford, the author of *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, says working with your hands “is a natural home for anyone who would live by his own powers, free not only of deadening abstraction, but also of insidious hopes and rising insecurities that seem to be endemic in our current economic life.”

I spent 35 yeas in manufacturing, and my primary goals were always about doing interesting things -- not money. Because there was so much change in manufacturing during that 35 years, there was always something new. I like doing new things even if they are dangerous, so it was easy to find interesting things that would satisfy my “doer” needs.

If you are one of the people who want to “be someone,” then you will have to spend all of your waking moments working at it. It is not for the feint of heart, but there is no question that if you can get into the club you can be rewarded with stock options, big salaries, power and many other perks. The odds of reaching the top are

slim, but I admire people who are willing to try.

So when you come to the Y in the road in your career, remember Colonel Boyd's question, do you want "to be somebody or to do something?"

Michael P. Collins is the author of the book Saving American Manufacturing*. You can find more related articles on his website via* www.mpcmgt.com *[1].*

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