

Winning Edge #38 – Expect the Unexpected

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In the early 1990s, the complex systems professor Scott Sagan

said of unexpected events, "*Things that have never happened before happen all the time.*"

That has certainly felt true in the last decade. But why do some people react quickly in a crisis while others freeze and don't act? In Amanda Ripley's book, *Unthinkable*, she interviewed dozens of people who had survived crises from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina and found a pattern of how people react. Ripley called this pattern the Survival Arc: Denial, Deliberation, Decisive Action:

1. **Denial:** People initially have **denial** about what's happening.
2. **Deliberate:** Then they **deliberate** and consider what to do next.
3. **Decisive Action:** Finally, they **decide** and **act**.

The difference between people is how quickly they go through this process. While some might take minutes or even longer to go through the deny, deliberate, decide cycle, others do it quickly and take decisive action. In a crisis, the speed of decision is often the difference in survival.

What do you do as a candidate when things that have never happened before happen? While the Survival Arc helps us understand how people naturally respond to crises, we need a framework to move quickly from denial to decisive action. This is where the OODA loop comes in. Developed by fighter pilot and military strategist John Boyd, the OODA loop provides a structured approach to rapid decision-making to help you effectively navigate unexpected situations. OODA stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act.

1. **Observe** the situation.

2. **Orient** yourself to think about how to change.
3. **Decide** on a course of action.
4. **Act** on your decision.

The key is not to make it a one-time decision. As you start to act, you observe the results, reorient or adjust, and make new decisions as needed.

Expect the Unexpected in Your Campaign

In the final weeks of your campaign, expect the unexpected. If you:

- **Get a Tough Question:** Remember you can give two points or a story plus an insight. (See [Winning Edge #25](#)).
- **Misspeak in an Interview or Debate:** Pause, give yourself a second to collect your thoughts, and then immediately clean up the mess. (See [Winning Edge #9](#)).
- **Get criticized by the media for something that happened in the past:** Use the 3 Rs to show regret, reason, and remedy. (See [Winning Edge #24](#)).
- **Have a Challenging Conversation with a Voter:** Use the "feel, felt, found" framework to respond with empathy. (See [Winning Edge #37](#)).

The key is to act quickly and decisively in the face of uncertainty. Observe, orient, decide, and then act. As you get more information, refine your decision. Don't be wedded to a single course of action.

In these final weeks, remember that things that have never happened before happen all the time. But you have the tools to respond effectively. By understanding the Survival Arc and implementing the OODA loop, you can confidently navigate unexpected situations.