

What 9/11 Taught Us About Leadership in a Crisis

Sept. 11 changed how U.S. Special Forces operated — and offers lessons for today's leaders.

By Stanley McChrystal and Chris Fussell

Mr. McChrystal is a former Army general and the founder of the McChrystal Group. Mr. Fussell is a former Navy Seal and the president of the McChrystal Group.

- March 23, 2020
-



Credit...Delcan & Company

On Sept. 11, 2001, the job of every leader in the U.S. Special Operations community changed. In the ensuing years of fighting a highly complex, networked enemy, we redesigned how our organization communicated, shared information, made decisions and, most critically, maintained a cohesive culture while operating in almost every corner of the globe.

We're seeing a similar challenge today — except this time, it's facing the leadership of practically every organization in the world, from governments to Fortune 500 companies to the smallest nonprofit. They are now managing their teams through a crisis with no clear end in sight.

Today's leaders didn't ask for this new role. But if history shows us one thing, it is that our greatest leaders emerge from the darkest moments.

Leaders must be visible with their plans, honest with their words and adaptable with their actions — all while maintaining compassion for the situation and the impact it is having on their team. As part of our work at the McChrystal Group, we are in constant contact with scores of leaders around the country. For the past week, they have been fielding a constant stream of queries from customers and employees, and going through a series of increasingly drastic changes to how they will run their business.

Understandably, these leaders are already weary from a succession of crisis response meetings and market assessments designed to get their team through this change. While tiring, these are all necessary efforts. But the leaders we've spoken with also recognize that these are simply the very first steps of a marathon. They know that the real challenge lies ahead.

In any crisis, there is a natural temptation to simply wait it out. Today's leaders cannot give in to this instinct. We're facing a perfect storm of economic downturn, social isolation and a fast-spreading pandemic. The answer to this problem will not suddenly reveal itself; leaders must create solutions. Any leaders that are not already on a war footing and preparing to fundamentally change their organizations for the foreseeable future must start moving today.

Here's what that means.

First, don't hunker down. At the height of the Royal Navy's dominance, British naval officers, impressive in ornate uniforms, were expected to stand erect on the ship's decks during battles, clearly exposed to enemy fire. It was not that little value was placed on their lives. Rather, ever greater value was placed on their leadership. Their job was to be visible to their sailors, and show calm amid the chaos. Today's leaders must also stand and be visible to their organizations, their communities, and their families.

Second, demonstrate candor — and demand it from the leaders below you. In combat, when things look bad, the front line troops always know it before the leadership. Denying reality makes your people assume you're either lying or out of touch. Organizations can handle bad news and tough times if they feel their leaders are focused

on solving the issues at hand. Today's leaders must be honest with their people to a level that will and should feel uncomfortable.

Third, give up more authority than feels natural. Fighting through complexity requires quick and informed action at the edge. This is dependent upon fast, transparent and inclusive communication. Organizations will need teammates making independent decisions close to the point of action, not waiting for direction. It's tempting in times of crisis to grab the reins and yank back, but this will be more disruptive than it is helpful. Be connected, listen and adapt based on what your front line is telling you.

Finally, be more compassionate than you think you need to be. As your organization disperses to remote-work status, the loss of personal interactions will quickly sink in. It will be easy for leaders to overlook or undervalue the fear and stress their people are feeling because of this isolation. All of us learn by watching our teammates, and gain confidence through informal feedback from our colleagues or bosses. Your organization has lost that person-to-person contact. You must immediately take your culture online, and learn to reinforce camaraderie, esteem, and compassion, via digital platforms.

We know how hard this is: We've been there. Fifteen years ago, in the throes of our fight against Al Qaeda, the Joint Special Operations Command, where both of us served, needed to do this exact thing. We pivoted from being a centrally located, thousands-strong enterprise to a network of small teams spread around the world.

"Digital leadership" was not in the job description for our generation, but it became a critical skill for all of us to learn in the fast-moving and constantly changing fight. At the height of the Iraq war, though units and leaders moved constantly across the battlefield, the vast majority of our interactions were by video conference. We became the military's ultimate remote-work force.

The most important of those digital forums among our 25,000-person enterprise was a daily, 90-minute video call where more than 7,000 members of our command across all the time zones "met" to discuss our efforts. The effectiveness of our leaders depended not upon wisdom or charisma, but on a willingness to leverage somewhat awkward video and other digital media to connect, listen, learn and inspire a team, most of whom would never be in the same room with one another.

We lived on that cadence for many years straight, staring into cameras the majority of the day. Now leaders everywhere need to follow suit. In the near term, it will make everything more cumbersome — it's harder to express sympathy through a computer screen, harder to deliver nuanced criticism when not in person, harder to read tone and body language. You can and must learn these skills, but it will take focus and effort. If you embrace it, you can form a new and stronger culture.

After a year into what we'd been calling "temporary" adjustments, we stopped talking about getting back to the old way of business. That Special Operations Task Force, the world's best counterterrorism organization, is now on its fifth generation of digital leadership, and it is more capable and cohesive than we would have ever imagined

possible. Accept that some of these changes are more than a temporary inconvenience, believe in yourself and your people, show confidence in your organization's ability to adapt, and you will come through this crisis stronger than might seem possible today.

We are now weathering a once-in-a-hundred-year event, and Americans are hurt — physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Leaders at all levels in society need to embrace the changes this crisis brings rather than struggle against it. Your people need you. This is your moment, and you can rise to it.

Stanley McChrystal is a former Army general and the founder of the McChrystal Group. Chris Fussell is a former Navy SEAL and the president of the McChrystal Group.

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) ([@NYTopinion](#)) and [Instagram](#).