Team of Teams

New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World

Review by COL Robert D. Forsten

As a recently retired senior leader in the US military's Special Operations community, General (Ret) Stanley McChrystal needs little introduction. His latest work, *Team of Teams,* based on his Task Force's exploits against terrorist networks in Iraq, can be applied to both military and business operations. Throughout his book, he explains how traditional leadership hierarchy models no longer work in today's well-connected and less predictable world. Combining lessons learned from industry, military anecdotes, and narratives inspired by his command of the Joint Special Operations Task Force, General McChrystal describes a new leadership framework where just being more efficient is not good enough in today's complex and uncertain environment.

This work describes an evolved leadership method, using military and industry examples that will keep aspiring leaders engrossed from the start. The author includes significant historical examples from the 19th and 20th centuries to explain how leadership adapted to solve problems but then he explains why a century's worth of conventional leadership strategies should be discarded because they do not work as well today. This is an insightful work that describes the refined leadership style needed to succeed in the information-overloaded 21st century military or civilian operating environment.

Although not mentioned in the book, the change in the leadership style that eventually led to positive results for the Task Force is the US military leadership philosophy of Mission Command. It is likely General McChrystal practiced Mission Command with his Task Force in Iraq, but by the time this book was published, the idea of Mission Command had already been embraced by US military leaders several years before (some in the military believe it was relearned).

The concept of "commander's intent" is inherent to successful Mission Command. The authors explain commander's intent by citing Horatio Nelson's orders before the sea battle of Trafalgar, noting that "No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy." The significance of commander's intent is that it allows a junior-level Soldier or employee to better understand what they should be doing and take initiative when the leader is not around.

The author discusses aspects of Mission Command such as pushing decision-making to lower levels of ownership or "eyes on, hands off" leadership, which is the reality of centralized planning and decentralized execution. The fundamental concept of trusting subordinate leaders worked well with the Task Force. Granted, this is much easier in the Special Operations community because most personnel are of above-average intelligence and are the best tactically trained personnel in the US military. By decreasing organizational stove-piped parochialism, the Task Force reconstructed itself to leverage interactions at lower levels rather than having to wait for orders from the top. Because it worked within the Task Force, General McChrystal believes this style of leadership could apply to larger service, agency, and business organizations across many time zones and countries.

Although an interesting overall read, his book can, at times, be confusing and vague. For example, phrases like "the Task Force had built systems that were very good at doing things right, but too inflexible to do the right thing" and "our actions were the product of our planning, and our planning was predicated on our ability to predict" read like a Phil Jackson "art of Zen" coaching book. But in his role with his leadership consulting firm, General McChrystal will probably use this technique at speaking engagements and Fortune 500 leadership seminars and will impress the crowd, because the business world, like the military, faces the challenge of the unknown. Neither can correctly predict where the next enemy attack, market crash, or competitor's discovery will occur and then respond quickly enough when it does. As the book notes, although far more is known today, the world is actually less predictable, and it is impossible to control the outcome of every event; all leaders will have to wade through the new 21st century "fog of war," whether conducting military or business operations.

The complicated and fast-paced military and business worlds of the 21st century demand a new leadership approach to achieve success. General McChrystal's book may sometimes read like psychobabble from a leadership charm school, but it highlights a useful model for leaders to help them recognize and deal with uncertainty. As in the airplane cockpit or surgical suite, the military and business environments are too complicated to track entirely and comprehend how each component works or relates; however, it is not the complicated airplane or human body that leads to errors during flight or surgery, but the lack of interpersonal communication. Both airline and medical studies demonstrate that outcomes can be negative in these overwhelmingly complicated situations, but with proper application, the leadership ideas described in *Team of Teams* promote a leadership method that improves speed and flexibility, and will reduce leader anxiety, increase efficiencies, and save jobs or lives. This book is extremely useful as a leadership concept or philosophy primer for current and future military and business leaders that want to become better leaders.