

Paul Thies: Well, thank you for joining me. I'm your host Paul Thies, and on this episode of If/when, we discuss situational responsiveness and leadership lessons in the context of uncertainty with two very distinguished guests. Joining me today are General Stan McChrystal, Founder and Chief Executive Officer McChrystal [00:00:30] Group, and Lieutenant General Bruce Crawford, Jacobs Senior Vice President Strategic Development, Critical Mission Solutions. Thank you both, General McChrystal and General Crawford, for joining me. I have been given permission to call you both by your first name. That was very important to me to ask that. To begin, I'd like to start with Stan. Sir, how would you coach leaders who are used to more traditional hierarchical models of command to shift to embrace more distributive models [00:01:00] of leadership?

Gen. Stan McChr...: Paul, thanks for the question and thanks for having Bruce and I on, and, Bruce, thanks for joining on today, and for all you've done. I think the first thing is most of us have to understand that's the way we were raised. We are almost reflexively hierarchical leaders, and the operating rhythm we put into organizations, the way we think about giving instructions, is based on years of programming, and [00:01:30] so you have to understand that that's your default. And sometimes it's the right answer, but you also have to understand, often, it's not the right answer. What I found, fairly early in my career, about 10 years in, I was a Ranger company commander, and I suddenly had these wonderfully talented non-commissioned officers, and they didn't need me to do their job and they didn't want me to do their job, and they were outspoken enough to communicate that to me.

And so what I would say the first thing is for leaders [00:02:00] is understand that your people are probably as smart and as competent as you, if not more so. You have to start with that expectation and you have to let go a little bit. And the biggest question I get from people is, "Well, if I let my subordinates have a tremendous amount of freedom, I'm still responsible for the outcome. That is risk to me." And I will say, in the short term and in a very narrow sense, that may be true. In the long term, it's the exact opposite. [00:02:30] In the long term, the organization ... it all begins at home. You got to first look in the mirror and decide that what you were was nice, but what you need to be is different.

Paul Thies: Yeah. And a great example of what you're talking about, I think, you articulate in your book Team of Teams, and being on the ground in Iraq and in Afghanistan and you're dealing with nontraditional combatants, who don't want to fight you with maybe [00:03:00] the rules that you had been trained in your military training, they're bringing different engagement models to you. Now, in that book, you use chess and gardening as metaphors for leadership styles. Can you describe those briefly and why you prefer one over the other, especially in today's complex operational environment?

Gen. Stan McChr...: Sure. The analogy seemed to fit. A Chess board has a chess master, or at least a chess player, controlling 16 pieces, and that one individual decides [00:03:30] where every one of the pieces goes, and the theory is you're against one

opponent on the other side who is also controlling 16 pieces, and so micromanagement works. In fact, it's required. When you get to a faster, more complex environment, what we found, what I found in Iraq, was, suddenly, there are a lot of very autonomous enemy forces making decisions, operating, adapting, and moving, and so I wasn't opposed to a single enemy leader [00:04:00] who was micromanaging their force. It was much more loosely networked or organic, and so they were wickedly fast, constantly adapting, and really lethal.

I had been raised to want to be the chess master. You work your way up and you want to move the chess pieces and you want to think you're good at that, but the reality is there's no way you can be fast enough, there's no way you can adapt for the conditions in each location well enough, so you just can't compete. That was [00:04:30] really the biggest transformation of my personal life, my leadership life, was in that period. And this is when Bruce and I met in Iraq was during the fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq when, to win, I had to be a different kind of leader than I'd been before for my organization to succeed.

It started with me having to let go. Now that doesn't mean I walked away and took my eyes and hands off, we called it eyes on, hands off leadership, but it was a different style that the gardening [00:05:00] analogy seem to fit, where you create an environment where plants do that which only plants can do, and you create an ecosystem and you manage that. It's a different role for a leader who wants to be the person in charge, moving chess pieces, but, ultimately, it's far more effective in the modern environment.

Paul Thies: Now-

Gen. Bruce Craw...: And, Paul, just to piggyback on that a little bit, because I know we'll have a discussion about leadership traits of the future, [00:05:30] this environment that General McChrystal describes, first of all, the leader has to acknowledge that there is going to have to be a different type of leadership required in the future to win. That's a tough thing, given how most leaders are raised, and he hit on that. But the second piece of it is a lot of this quote-unquote creating that environment, it has to happen before need, meaning it's one of those things you have to cultivate as a leader.

[00:06:00] There is absolutely no substitute for preparation, and so a part of the training, a part of the institutional change that has to happen to create that, is incumbent upon the leader, meaning what he described isn't something that can be created today and literally used tomorrow. It's one of those systemic things that has to be incremental, incrementally done. First, acknowledge a different type of leader required in the future. The second piece is, as the leader, [00:06:30] regardless of what echelon you're in, you have to create that environment, all right? That's not something you can delegate to your deputy and say, "Go off and create the environment that's going to allow this different

type of thinking and this different type of culture to emerge and be successful in the future."

Paul Thies: Yeah, and I imagine that underpinning all of that is trust, right? And it goes back to, Stan, what you said earlier about your subordinates having ... I think there had to have been a certain element of trust where they [00:07:00] could manage up, so to speak, so that allowed you to do what you needed to do and them to do what they needed to do. Now, Bruce, you recently contributed a chapter in a book called *Navigating the Digital Age*, in which you admonish readers to forget about the new normal, right, we've been hearing about the new normal this past year, and instead focus on the new now. And can you tell us a little bit about what you mean by new now and the key things that we should be focusing on, especially in the post-COVID environment?

Gen. Bruce Craw...: [00:07:30] Paul, thanks for that. And what you're referring to is, while I was in my transition, I had took about 90 days off to think about who I am and what I think I wanted to do and move, and I had a new grandbaby show up and all those kinds of cool things, and I was approached by Palo Alto Networks. They said, "Look, we heard you speak at a panel about 90 days ago and you talked about this concept of the new normal, but you were talking about this thing called [00:08:00] the new now. And, well, how does that resonate? Where'd you come up with that? How'd you come up with that? We listened in on ..." Actually, it was a West Point Naval Academy and an Air Force Academy cyber conference that I spoke at.

And so this was, literally, during the transition before I decided what I was going to do. And, initially I said no, I just gave you this as context, because I'm going, "Look, I got to find a house." But I went back and thought and said, "I've done op-eds, but I've never done anything like this and it might be interesting," [00:08:30] and so I decided to do it, with that as a backdrop. Literally, people coming out of, I won't say on the front end of COVID, and I know, General McChrystal, you saw a lot of this, people were longing for the good old days, and so, every five minutes, there was a different variant of new normal, what's the new normal going to be, etc.

And, as I often do, I was out running, I truly believe that's where all great ideas emanate, but I was out on a morning run off of Fort McNair, [00:09:00] where I was living in downtown D.C., and I started thinking about this, going, "This can't be it. It can't be it," and, when I say it, that all we need to do is figure out what the new normal looks like. And just a little bit of intellectual curiosity led me to go, "Listen, there's got to be something else, right?" New normal, think about 9/11. I happened to be in the Pentagon on 9/11. I was a brand new lieutenant colonel [00:09:30] in the Army. And, if you think about what happened right after 9/11, and, General McChrystal, I know you were deeply involved in the shaping of a lot of this, our force posture changed immediately overnight. There were things we adopted literally within 24 to 48 hours of 9/11, such as things

we're doing at our post camps and stations from a security perspective, but things we were doing in our airports.

You could argue, and although technology has evolved significantly since we adopted those things, that 12 months ago, [00:10:00] 18, 16, 15 months ago, when we really started on this COVID, post-COVID, pandemic journey, that, when you look back to 9/11, we're still literally doing some of those things, things that we adopted within 48, 72 hours of 9/11. Categorically, we're still doing these things. When I started thinking about the new normal, a new now, I said, "Something's fundamentally different right here," that this idea [00:10:30] of a new now took into account the fact that, every day we woke up for the past 18 months, there was a new variable in the equation that required us to be a lot more adaptive, a lot more intellectually curious, and a lot more creative.

And it didn't matter whether you ran a business, right? If you're focusing the adaptation, post-COVID, of your business on this idea that, number one, there's an end state, all right, and I just need to get to that end state. And these variables that started last March, [00:11:00] well, they're going to remain the same throughout the next 24 to 36 months. It didn't matter whether you're in the Army, the military, or you're running a business, you've got this ... the fundamental difference between the longing for a new normal and this big idea of new now is this adaptive mindset.

Back to the earlier point, and it actually ties to that, that things are going to be different and that you've got to focus not on an end state, but more on the fact that there's a cascading [00:11:30] series of future states that are likely to emerge and shape your thinking, which allows you to not only continuously adapt, and there's a lot of work, these are just words on paper here, I got it, but not only continuously adapt, but to also adapt at speed and scale over time, if you're able to create that environment that says, "Things are going to change. Let's not focus on an end state. Let's focus on a cascading series of future states where variables in the equation will [00:12:00] change over time." And so I know, again, this is just talking, but I, literally, while I was running, said, "This longing for the days of old and just getting people back to that cannot be the answer. There's got to be more," hence this idea of a new now [inaudible 00:12:17] the new normal. Hopefully, that's helpful.

Paul Thies: Yeah, and I really liked what you said about the cascading series of events. The now will evolve, or there'll be new nows, right, or new states, [00:12:30] because we have no idea of what is going to occur in terms of big scale events, but then, also, just the constant evolution and fluidity of data and technology and disruptiveness. It's like we're constantly having to change and evolve and be able to respond to that. Now, Bruce, in business as in warfare, today's threat environment is potentially much more complex [00:13:00] than ever before, and data and technology, of course, are enabling much of that. How can organizations pivot to more nimble methods of response?

Gen. Bruce Craw...: Well, from a data perspective, and you've heard it stated in a context of this whole idea of great power competition, it's not just military, there's an economic piece, etc., etc., and so being able to leverage data to inform, back to getting to speed, I've heard it described as being able to orient, decide, and act faster [00:13:30] than peer adversaries, and there are different variants of that, really, really important that we deal with the leveraged data to inform that ability to do that. And so, as we look at the current threat environment, everyone wants to stay one step ahead, whether it's a cybersecurity discussion or it's more of a kinetic discussion. I've always thought that being able to harness the data that we have and make sure that that data is shareable [00:14:00] at echelon is a key cog in the wheel there, so to speak.

And so the good news is we got a lot of data. When I say we, I'm talking the collective we across the United States, or you can talk about DOD, etc. The bad news is most of that data is in either a location where it can't be shared or it's in a location where it's not visible, etc., and it can't be protected in the right way. And so, if you go back and take a look at ... you can go back as far as the Cybersecurity Solarium of last year, [00:14:30] the Solarium Report, or you can just go a month or so ago and look at the recent POTUS executive order reference cybersecurity, all come back to this idea of being able to leverage data as a strategic asset.

I got an opportunity to sit in recently, just last week, and I heard every chief data officer in DOD, it wasn't just OSB, but it was every service chief data officer, every one of them has some type of initiative on the conveyor belt moving literally left [00:15:00] to right to quote-unquote leverage data as a more strategic asset in their organization, whether they're leveraging it to weaponize it or they're leveraging it to try and protect it better. Back to your question, great question, and specifically I'd say moving it to another level, how do you, as an organization, whether you're a business or you're the department of the Army or the DOD or whatever [inaudible 00:15:27] agencies, how do you create this culture in your [00:15:30] organization where data can be leveraged as more of a strategic asset?

Gen. Stan McChr...: Can I jump on that? Because, Paul, I think General just nailed it on two points, which are related, and they're almost the precursor to any discussion about leadership in the future. The first is we are going to be going against moving targets, everything's going to be moving, therefore, it's constant adaptation, as he described. And then the idea is we are going to need data to know where the [00:16:00] targets are moving, and so we are going to have to have the facility to digest that data and then the adaptability to deal with it. And, almost, you ought to play what he said there as the beginning part of any discussion on leadership for future leaders.

Now where does this take us? In my opinion, what that means is we, as leaders, have got to recalculate a little bit. We've got to recalculate how our systems operate, not just how we function as leaders, but how our [00:16:30] systems

around us, how our information comes and is distributed across the organization, where and how decisions are made, which I would argue they're going to need to get closer to the point of action because you'll need to be operating faster. And we now have the ability to push data and, therefore, conclusions closer. We don't have to keep it at the headquarters, at the C-suite. We can push it down to where smart people ...

But then the other thing we have to do is we have to push an expectation [00:17:00] of action. We have to push through our organizations this idea that we not only want you to make decisions, we expect you to make decisions. And that's different for old guys like me because I spent all my life getting senior enough so I could make all the decisions. My dad was a soldier and he had this joke when I would help him. He was a big craftsman, I'd be helping him by fetching tools, and he'd go "Put your brains in the footlocker. [00:17:30] I'll do the thinking around here," and we got to go in the opposite direction now because nothing else works.

Gen. Bruce Craw...: I would just, for 30 seconds on the data discussion, absolutely, treating data as a strategic asset will be very important. There's also the D word, and the D word is divestiture. We've got to be willing to let go of the old things because one of the barriers to, I won't call it this change, the adaptation, I've [00:18:00] found is everybody's for change as long as it's you changing, and being able to create this culture of leveraging data as a strategic asset, I found a way, not the way, is to acknowledge that there's got to be divestiture of the old in order to fuel the new because, culturally, again, there's a lot of great discussions and a lot of really smart people are talking about digitization.

I haven't cautioned, but what I've come in and said is the biggest, I'd say, pillar [00:18:30] and the center of gravity of digitization has got to be culture, right? You could be handing out free money from a digital side, but no one will take it because, culturally, they don't trust it, back to trust. And so I'd say a big part of this idea of leveraging data, since we're having a data discussion, as a strategic asset, has got to be divestiture and a willingness to divest of legacy, in this particular case, non-authoritative data services has [00:19:00] got to just be a part of it, I think.

Paul Thies: Yeah. Let me pick up on that a little bit, on some of these threads here, and I'll start with you, Stan, and then, Bruce, I've got a question as a follow-up for you. But so, Stan, and you hit on some of this, but what tangible steps can leaders take to encourage agility in organizational decision-making, perhaps in response to on the ground conditions, while maintaining the integrity and respect of their command? It's one thing [00:19:30] to have that mindset, "Okay, I'm going to be more, maybe loose is not necessarily the right word, but I'm going to loosen the reins a little bit and allow the horse to run some," but what can you actually do to put that into practice?



Gen. Stan McChr...: I would tell you the conclusions I've derived from my experience, and, remember, this is a data point of one, one guy. First is you need to understand what's not negotiable, what's not flexible, and those are your core values. That is things [00:20:00] like integrity, things like the law of armed conflict. We take them for granted, but they're very, very important, and you have to have those mooring points to hook you as an individual and the organization to something because not everything's negotiable. Now, once you've determined what can't slide or move, then everything else is in play. And what I would say is you've got to start with the idea that some of the things which make [00:20:30] organizations traditionally operate in an effective disciplined way, doctrine, process, procedure, they have a value, but they also are two-edged swords and you've got to be careful you're not getting cut with the other edge.

You put so much process in that you get bureaucracy, you put so much connectivity in that people start misusing that connectivity to go to the boss for every decision, and so you've got to realize that, in the [00:21:00] case of the military, doctrine worked for us, but I would also argue, when we got into Iraq and Afghanistan, doctrine also worked against us. There were some people who felt, "If I did it the way the checklist said, that I was doing the right answer," and, in reality, I was taught, as a lieutenant, if it's stupid and it works, it ain't stupid. We've got to craft ourselves as leaders, and our organization, with the idea we're out to get a certain outcome [00:21:30] and that's what matters and, every time the conditions change, we need to be changing with them as fast as we can figure it out.

Paul Thies: Now, and to that point, Bruce, we live in a world, and I love this point, there's 44 zettabytes of data in the world, and a zettabyte is a one with 21 zeros behind it. And they, I think it's the IDC, they expect it to jump up to 180 zettabytes, I think, in the next 10 [00:22:00] years. It's an obscene amount of data that is being generated by all the devices on earth and whatnot. You take that ecosphere, there's so much to know and to parse out, but decision-making capabilities are greatly enhanced, but so my question for you, Bruce, is what qualities of human leadership do you see as necessary to ensure organizations stay true to their missions and don't go off chasing windmills?

Gen. Bruce Craw...: Yeah, [00:22:30] the obvious of character and competence. General Chrystal talked about trust earlier. If you're competent and you take care of people, there's a whole lot of trust that happens relatively quickly, that people understand that you're not just the guy who's telling them what to do, that you're willing to do some of these things yourselves and demonstrate that. Those are at the very top of my list. But a couple others that I've seen, again, [00:23:00] General Chrystal's written about a couple of these in a couple of his books, and just a couple of experiences on my behalf and things that I've seen in variety of different units for 34 years, we talked about adaptability, and that's thrown out there, "We want you to be agile and adaptive," without taking the time to explain to young people why that's going to be important.

We want you to be agile and adaptive because you're going to face adversity, right? If things [00:23:30] are just going smoothly, you're good, you can just keep doing what you're doing and you're going to assume some success, but this idea of being agile and being adaptive gets to you becoming more resilient over time, right, that, when you get knocked down, regardless of what life throws at you or what the mission throws at you, that you're willing to get up, get up and continue, all right, and you feel empowered to do that, all right? That's just a couple. The other one, though, is a little bit more abstract, and it's [00:24:00] this idea that you're willing to surround yourself with people who think completely different than you do. I call it avoiding the mini-me syndrome.

I talked to everyone from second lieutenants to general officers that I mentored in my last job and said, "Listen, I had my grandfather, who raised me, who couldn't read or write, all right, but he used to say something, 'If you fish in a goldfish pond, all you catch are goldfish.'" I've heard that over and over and over again with other leaders [00:24:30] that I've encountered and became mentors to me over the years. His big reason for saying that, and what I took away from that, was, listen, if you want that same outcome, keep fishing right here, but, if you a different outcome, be willing to surround yourself with people who think differently than you do and create an environment where, when the emperor has no clothes, that there's a hand that people feel empowered to come tell you.

And I had this happen a lot over the years, all right, " [00:25:00] General Crawford, that is the worst idea I've ever heard. What about consider this?" and you don't shoot the messenger. There are a variety of different things that are really, really important in terms of leadership traits, to a variety of different, really, really smart thought leaders that are out there, but being agile and adaptive, absolutely. But just a little bit more abstract, be willing to surround yourself with people who think differently and then create an environment where it's okay for them to come tell you that your bright idea [00:25:30] is actually the worst one they've ever heard and be willing to accept their offering of a different approach is just an offer, given the likelihood of the future that we're going to face.

Paul Thies: I gotcha. To wrap things up a little bit here, General McChrystal, what leadership strategies, learned from your military career, seem to you the most applicable to organizations contending with situations of massive [00:26:00] disruption?

Gen. Stan McChr...: I guess I'd start with humility. Unless you are much better than most people I know, you're not going to have all the right answers, nor are you going to get it right every time. The first thing is your strategy should be to harness as much of the talent across the organization as you can, get them engaged, have them participate, have them make decisions. Sometimes it's a touch slower, sometimes it's a little bit more frustrating, but the reality is, at the end of the day, it will produce a better, more [00:26:30] flexible outcome.



Paul Thies: Oh, that's great. Yeah. And humility, it's just gold, right, and it's like it's so hard, but all the best leaders, it seems, really have that innate sense. They've really embraced humility, and, from there, there goes trust, right? That's where trust is allowed to flourish. And then, Bruce, what do the leaders of tomorrow need to be doing today?

Gen. Bruce Craw...: I've actually got what I hope [00:27:00] is a leader of tomorrow, a young captain who recently came back from Afghanistan and is going to grad school now, in the family, same name. What I talk to him about is diversity of assignments. Absolutely, you want to take on the hard jobs, but I suspect, when you look at the bios of very successful people who've been game-changers, one of which we're talking to here on the screen, they took on a couple jobs they didn't want early on [00:27:30] because someone made them, said, "No, no, you're not going to go do this job, that, when you're looking from the bottom up going, 'Boy, that's the dream job,' you're going to go do this job."

And, later on in life, that job, because I've had several of those, it provided you with insights that you couldn't pay for, all right, the fact that you took that experience. And so my advice to young people now is really take on the hard jobs, but don't [00:28:00] be afraid to get out of your comfort zone, okay, in one of those jobs, especially if you aspire to make this a career, because you're going to exercise some muscles that you either didn't know you had or hadn't used in a long time that are going to be very beneficial to you down the road.

And so the only point that I wanted to make that's related to the broader discussion that we've had, it's not maybe as much advice to young people, but it is a think piece that [00:28:30] involves young people, and it's the sole idea of the workforce of tomorrow, and the bigger idea is reimagining the workforce of the future, and taking a step back, the geezers of my generation here, and taking a step back and saying, "Listen, the workforce that we're talking about, especially in business, is no longer motivated by the things that maybe motivated General McChrystal, and motivated me, coming into the military, all right?"

There's this thing that I've learned called work-life balance, really [00:29:00] important to [crosstalk 00:29:00], all right? And so, when you think about what motivates them, perhaps it's not just money. That didn't motivate us coming into the military, but when you start to look at the workforces that we're out speaking to now in industry, the things that motivate them are things like meaningful work, okay, and making sure that doing meaningful work on a daily basis and making sure that their voice is counted, that their vote figuratively counts in the organization, and that [00:29:30] the boss that they work for really cares about what they think.

And so you've read many stories and a lot of really good books have been written about the race for talent, and it's a global, international race for the best and brightest that are out there. Perhaps, as we take a look at that, we should

consider the fact that, as we reimagine the workforce of the future and start to develop that next greatest generation of leaders, that the things that will keep them on [00:30:00] your team aren't the same things that kept us on the team over the years, and perhaps meaningful work and putting them in environments where they can do meaningful work, things that matter, will go a long way towards not only getting them, but keeping them and inspiring them.

Paul Thies: Well said. Well, General McChrystal and General Crawford, I want to thank you both very much, and I would be remiss if I didn't thank you both so much for your service to our country. We owe you a huge debt of [00:30:30] gratitude, so thank you.