LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Team of Teams

by Stanley McChrystal

A general rebuilt a rigid command into a fast, open network - and beat an enemy that changed daily.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **In a complex world, adaptability beats efficiency.**

The Task Force was world-class at executing plans, but Al Qaeda in Iraq rewrote its tactics daily. Efficiency optimizes for a stable world; when the environment shifts constantly, the side that adapts fastest wins.

02 **Learn to tell 'complicated' from 'complex' - they demand opposite kinds of management.**

A jet engine is complicated: many parts, but predictable, so experts and plans work. A networked insurgency is complex: interdependent parts react to each other, outcomes emerge that no plan can foresee, so they must be sensed and answered in real time.

03 **Build for resilience, not just efficiency - a perfectly tuned system that cannot bend will break.**

Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right thing, and in a swirling fight you rarely know the right thing in advance. Resilient networks absorb shocks and reconfigure; brittle hierarchies snap.

04 **It takes a network to defeat a network.**

McChrystal fused his siloed units into a team of teams: each small team kept its own skills and identity, but the relationships between teams came to resemble the trust inside a single team, so a force of thousands could move like one organism.

05 **Trust and common purpose are the operating system everything else runs on.**

Open information and pushed-down decisions collapse into chaos without them. Units that had competed with each other first had to fuse around one mission and believe sister teams would act in good faith - relationships built before the crisis, not during it.

06 **Shared consciousness: give the whole force the same picture, every day.**

The daily Operations & Intelligence forum opened the Task Force's briefing - and most of its secrets - to thousands of people across three continents. When everyone sees the same facts and the commander's intent, anyone can make the right call without asking permission.

07 Flip 'need to know' into a duty to share.

Hoarded intelligence crawled up the chain for approval and orders crawled back down; by then the target had moved. In a complex fight you cannot know in advance which fact will matter, so information has to flow sideways, fast, and by default.

08 Break silos with people, not memos - embed liaisons, and send your best.

Each unit placed a trusted officer inside the others, for months at a time. The program only worked when units sent top performers rather than people they could spare: those personal bonds built the trust that beat the prisoner's dilemma of hoarding and turf.

09 Empowered execution: push the decision to the person with the best information.

Once shared consciousness existed, McChrystal stopped approving operations one by one, and raid tempo climbed from roughly ten a month to about three hundred. The order matters - empower people who cannot see the whole picture and you get chaos, not speed.

10 Eyes on, hands off.

The leader keeps full visibility - showing up in the forum, asking hard questions - but refuses to rubber-stamp or snatch decisions back. Subordinates inform rather than ask permission, and the boss intervenes only when the stakes truly demand it.

11 Lead like a gardener, not a chess master.

You cannot move every piece anymore. Your job is to tend the environment - transparency, trust, shared purpose, healthy habits - and maintain the ecosystem where smart action grows on its own.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

In 2004, General Stanley McChrystal's Joint Special Operations Task Force was the most capable fighting force in Iraq - better trained, better equipped, and better supplied with intelligence than its enemy. It was still losing the race. Al Qaeda in Iraq was a loose network of cells tied together by phones, forums, and kinship that adapted daily; dismantle one node and the network regrew. Hunting its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Americans kept arriving a step behind.

The problem, McChrystal concluded, was not skill but structure. His command was built on Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management - break work into parts, specialize, let managers think and workers execute. That reductionist model masters complicated problems: systems with many parts but predictable behavior. Iraq was complex instead: interdependent actors reacting to one another, where small causes produce outsized effects and no plan survives contact. The very efficiency that made the force excellent also made it brittle.

His answer was to fight a network with a network - a team of teams. The foundation was trust and common purpose: rival units that had hoarded information and competed for credit had to fuse

around a single mission. On that base he built shared consciousness, most visibly through a daily Operations & Intelligence forum that grew to thousands of participants across three continents, replacing the 'need to know' culture with a duty to share. Liaison officers embedded in sister units turned coordination into personal trust.

Only then came empowered execution: decision authority pushed down to the people closest to the fight, inside the commander's stated intent. McChrystal stopped approving operations individually - eyes on, hands off - and the tempo climbed from roughly ten raids a month to about three hundred, without decision quality falling. His own job changed with it: from chess master moving every piece to gardener, tending the transparency, trust, and habits that let the force adapt on its own.

The closing argument reaches far beyond war. Speed, dense interconnection, and complexity now define markets, epidemics, supply chains, and technologies as well. In that world, the book concludes, sustained adaptability - not efficiency - is the central competency of an organization, and it comes from exactly two things working together: shared consciousness and empowered execution.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, build the two halves in the book's order. First, shared consciousness: start a recurring 30-minute open briefing where every team shares what it is working on, what it learned, and where it is stuck - real information, including bad news, no status theater. Second, empowered execution: pick one decision you normally approve yourself, state the intent and the limits in plain words, and hand it to the person closest to the work. Stay available for questions, but do not take the decision back.

Stanley McChrystal, with Tantum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell, first published 2015. For leaders whose organizations are too slow and siloed for a problem that will not sit still.