

# LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

## LESSONS LEARNED BY US ARMY GENERAL

As leaders around the world battle to bring their organisations through the current pandemic, retired US Army General Stanley A. McChrystal recently outlined how the lessons he learned during his high-profile career with the US Armed Forces are still vital today. Sgt Wayne Fitzgerald, who took part in the exclusive webinar, provides a synopsis of the event organised and hosted by the City Security And Resilience Networks (CSARN).

Leadership in times of crisis' was the title of the fourth webinar in the series on leadership values during the pandemic, with others titled 'Pandemics without borders - protecting our people'; 'COVID-19: critical discussions for the new normal', and 'Are we fully prepared for the next biological event?'

Over 150 participants from around the world tuned into the webinar, including private companies, government organisations, members of the UK Armed Forces, UK Police Forces, An Garda Síochána and the Irish Defence Forces. This was a great discussion on leadership and many thanks to CSARN for the invitation.

General Stanley A. McChrystal, a graduate of West Point and the Naval War College, has served in the following theatres of war during his career – Operation Desert Shield, Gulf War, War in Afghanistan and the Iraq War. He has commanded the US and international forces in Afghanistan with NATO's International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), which included 150,000 troops from 45 different countries, and was previously Commander of the US military's counter-terrorism force JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command).

He has been described as 'creating a cohesive counter-terrorism organisation that revolutionised the inter-agency 'operating culture' in Afghanistan. During a very impressive military career, he commanded a number of elite organisations, including the 75th Ranger Regiment.

### COMPARING COVID TO TERRORIST THREAT

Starting off the webinar, General McChrystal compared the Covid-19 pandemic to a terrorist threat and noted how it grew very quickly and was deadly. He spoke about his experience in Iraq, when he took command in Afghanistan, and when asked to reveal the three big things he took away from his experience, he explained that there was actually four.

He discussed the importance of intelligence in the battlespace, saying they spent a lot of time looking at how



*Four-star General Stanley A. McChrystal, US Armed Forces. (Photo: US Department of Defence)*

Al-Qaeda operated, before explaining that they needed to understand how they operated themselves. He explained that you need to find out what works before trying to solve the problem, and what you are not going to be able to solve.

The second was to understand the problem – US Armed Forces did not just want to take out the leadership of Al-Qaeda, but rather needed to understand them and how they operate. He further explained that Iraqi civilians even those who didn't support Al-Qaeda fundamentals were still assisting them, so they needed to look further back on why the Populus was supporting them.

Thirdly concerned the issue of adaptation, and the General explained that early in command, you need to have the ability to adapt; starting with an assumption we have to change our mindset and start with me. This is based on decision making, he explained.

His final point was about good people, asking whether or not those individuals in leadership positions needed to look in the mirror, which he qualified in the affirmative, claiming that they need to a lot!



General McChrystal at the Pentagon giving a briefing regarding the Iraq War, in April 2003. (Photo: www.defense.gov)

**DEVOLVED LEADERSHIP**

Speaking about devolved leadership and pushing it down the chain of command he explained that we need to provide the inspiration to hit them every day and that in the absence of leadership the organisation will fail. He added that it can be quiet leadership,

The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organisation, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing.

A gardening approach to leadership is anything but passive. The leader acts as an ‘Eyes-On, Hands-Off’ enabler who creates and maintains an ecosystem in which the organisation operates

– General Stanley McChrystal, “Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World”

but it must be continuous. He finished by saying that someone down at ground level can make decisions on the ground that could be harmful to the main intention and so ‘the mission’ needs to be shared down the chain of command.

Looking at Covid-19 he explained that to defeat a pandemic you have to make decisions early, which may look irrational but must be scientifically based, and to get in front of the pandemic because once it has passed

you, you are losing.

One final point that he made that relates to all military forces around the world was that every soldier now has access to a smartphone with internet access. They can contact home during an operation and discuss information. Commanders now have to compete with that and understand that they have to provide a consistent flow of information.

He concluded by saying that “people can sniff out spin” and the



Afghan and American soldiers blew up a Taliban firing position in the village of Layadira in Kandahar Province, in February 2013. (Photo: Bryan Denton/The New York Times)



*US Army soldier on patrol in an Iraqi suburb in 2007. Photo: Spc. Daniel Herrera, 55th Signal Co. (COMCAM)/US Army.*

information can then be discounted – so that it’s better to use less spin when passing on the mission and orders.

**DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARDS**

Following 9/11, he was deployed in a number of leadership positions in combat over a six-year period. His awards and decorations include the Defence Distinguished Service Medal (2), Army Distinguished Service Medal, Defence Superior Service Medal (2), Legion of Merit (3) and a Bronze Star Medal. General McChrystal retired from the US Armed Forces on 1 August 2010.

He was more than happy to be called ‘Stan’ during the webinar by the host Brett Lovegrove MA FRSA FSyl FICPEM, who was the former head of counter-terrorism for the City of London Police Force and is the Chief Executive of CSARN.

General McChrystal started by discussing the challenges he faced in leading JSOC through one of the most difficult periods in his country’s history, most notably the war on terror after the 9/11 attacks on the US. He outlined how the lessons he learned are still vital today as leaders fight to bring their organisations through the current Covid-19 pandemic.

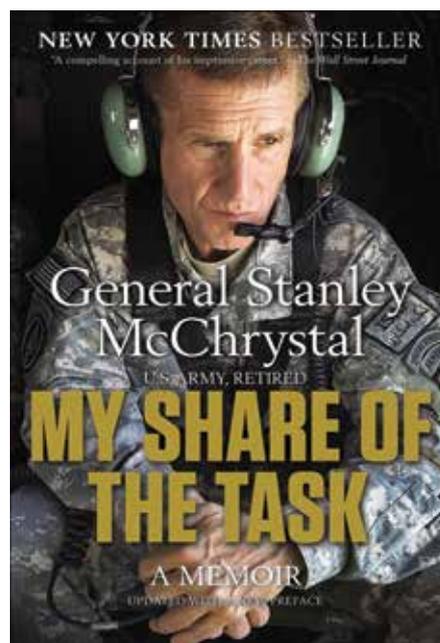
A senior fellow at Yale University’s Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, he teaches a course on leadership, and also sits on the boards of a large number of businesses and organisations. McChrystal Group has partnered with organisations

in financial services, oil and gas, healthcare, energy, engineering and the public sector for a number of years.

Helping them turn the lens on themselves is a major part of what they do. He is a successful speaker on leadership and the author of a number of books on the same subject. His memoir ‘My Share of the Task’ was a New York Times bestseller in 2013; another New York Times bestseller in 2015 with ‘Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World’ and he co-authored ‘Leaders: Myth

and Reality’ (a Wall Street Journal bestseller).

For further details on CSARN (UK based not-for-profit business security and resilience membership network for public and private sector leaders) visit [www.csarn.org](http://www.csarn.org). Visit [www.mcchrystalgroup.com](http://www.mcchrystalgroup.com) to learn more about the McChrystal Group.



*General McChrystal’s personal memoir was a New York Times bestseller in 2013.*



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Sgt Wayne Fitzgerald joined the Defence Forces in 1990, serving initially with the 5 Inf Bn. During his near 31-year career he has worked in a number of roles within the Army and Air Corps. He has served overseas as a peacekeeper with the UN, EU and NATO Pfp in Lebanon (1991), Kosovo (2002, 2010) and Bosnia (2008).

He served as the Editor of An Cosantóir Magazine from May 2011 until August 2020.

Wayne is the co-author, along with military historian Paul O’Brien, of Shadow Warriors as featured in this issue on pages 26-31.