McChrystal Group

333 N. Fairfax St., Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314

mcchrystalgroup.com
contact@mcchrystalgroup.com



Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If you're leading a group with a mission, you may feel bombarded with advice, priorities, and judgment from all sides.

"Steering the ship" or "keeping the plates spinning" or "fighting fires" are all trite metaphors for the often intangible effort of leading. Right now, we are faced with important decisions amid drastic culture changes, and the organizational system we previously relied upon on are simply insufficient for the speed of the information age.

A military leader might not be the obvious source of business advice, but the book Team of Teams offers novel ways of shifting large organizational structures to deeply improve them. Drawing on lessons from leading the Joint Special Operations Task Force, General McChrystal offers case studies on how teams across the world coordinated more effectively to fight a constantly evolving enemy. It's parallel to the daily battle to keep our teams moving forward, despite new and varied challenges every day. Too often, we wonder, "Why didn't it work this time?"

In complex environments, each event is its own unique occurrence – and will need to be solved that way. While fighting Al Qaeda in Iraq, the "tried and true" didn't work because the shape-shifting adversary slipped away and reformed. They never lost focus, even when they lost leaders. The task force needed to adapt. McChrystal's teams turned the tide, not with increased firepower, but internal culture change: sharing more information, building more trusting teams, and letting people closer to the action make decisions.

Team of Teams is about optimizing networks for a common purpose, with insights about infusing our teams' efforts. With the lightning fast changes in technology, talent, and culture, we need simple steps to strengthen our efforts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

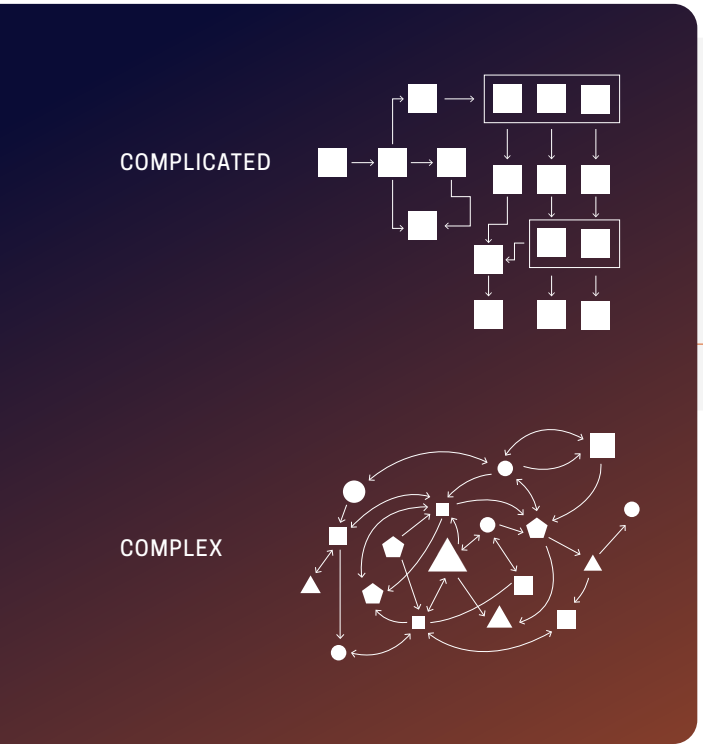


The Deep Roots of our Efficiency Obsession

Reference Chapter 2

McChrystal highlighted the influence of Frederick Winslow Taylor [p.6 & p.36], who optimized manufacturing in the 19th century. Before then, tradespeople created "beautiful contraptions" independently, with their own intricate processes. Taylor sought to find the best way (what today we call "a best practice") and broke down the components of every job. Managers kept things in working order and maintained morale; laborers did tasks but weren't expected to understand anything more.

Many of our current business leadership principles, including the assembly line, information silos, and management hierarchy, are based on this mental revolution: **waste is wrong, efficiency is the highest good**. Constant vigilance comes at a cost, and that cost may be that your team cannot handle anything non-standard (much less an emergency) without you, or that communication between teams is sacrificed. It's true, we have become highly productive...until something unexpected happens, and those unexpected happenings are coming fast!



Complex vs Complicated Means Adaptability Wins

Reference Chapter 3

Facing problems with "different solutions on different days" was fundamentally disturbing to the military's order, built on discipline and planning. It took time to craft different kinds of responses, and that wasn't successful until deep changes happened in how and when teams shared information. Factors of the

21st century have shifted complicated systems into more complex ones, forcing us to change faster to respond. Agility and innovation are now more valuable because efficiency and discipline rely on linear, predictable operations. [Team of Teams case study Boston Emergency Department pages 100-102]

Managers are skilled at handling a variety of problems....until there's a truly new crisis to manage: an unexpected departure, a breaking news story, a change in regulations. Preparation for the unknown is postponed until "things calm down" and the cycle of complexity continues, with the elusive state of "catching up" never attainable. When crisis mode is the new norm, leadership can't spend time preventing problems.

The Folly of Forecasting: Data Creates Illusions of Control



> *"The evidence on the folly of forecasting is overwhelming… frankly the three blind mice have more credibility than any macro-forecaster at seeing what is coming"*
>
> – JAMES MONTIER

Complex systems present a range of possible outcomes, which prevent us from making accurate predictions. Small things may have no impact or a massive one – and its **impossible to know** which will turn out to be the case! The same advances that brought us mountains of information have also created volatile communication platforms, adding more complexity to every aspect of life. Decisions have moved from data-poor predictability to today's data-rich uncertainty.

Data can be wonderful for explaining how complex phenomena happened and how they might happen, but they cannot tell us **when** and **where** they will happen. Even with all the data we have on weather, or health care, or sports teams – we still live in unpredictable environments. While there have been algorithmic breakthroughs, we rarely see the promised clarity and certainty that we can act on.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Instant Communication Leads to Delays?

More information access, communication options, and video capabilities should allow us to see what's happening around the globe in real time. However, the task force identified that **instantaneous communication swamped** senior leadership with requests for decisions. Instead of adding speed, chain of command requests slowed decisions because **it took time** to collect information, decide, and communicate – in turn, stifling the ability of soldiers to move and adapt quickly. "Like ripe fruit left in the sun, intelligence spoils quickly."

Robust vs Resilient: How Do You Want to Survive?

Reference Part II



Robustness is achieved by strengthening parts of the system; resilience is linked to elements that can reconfigure in response to change. The Egyptian pyramids are robust - they have successfully **resisted** the likely stressors: wind, rain, and time. But if an unexpected stressor, say a bomb, blew a pyramid apart, the structure could not reassemble itself. A coral reef, on the other hand, survives hurricanes not by being robust, but through resilience.



Training is important, but it involves actions useful only against anticipated challenges. Education requires deep, fundamental understanding, which can be used to grasp and respond to a nearly infinite variety of threats. **Education is resilient, training is robust.** In organizations, this looks like standard operating procedure documents versus experience – you can't prepare for every scenario. You want your veteran team members to handle this new situation with their skills and judgment, not searching for their training binders to see how it's categorized. [See the examples illustrating how this played out on two passenger flights, pages 87-91]

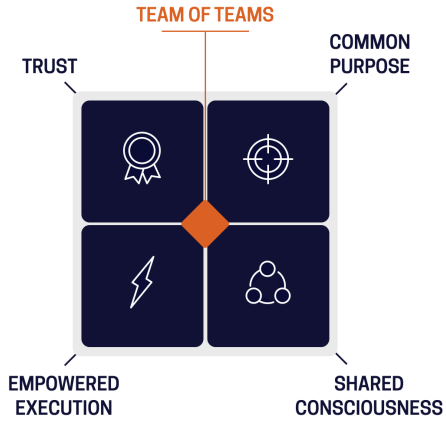


Brains, Not Bodies: People Power

Reference Chapters 8 & 9

"Cultures are more resistant to design change than bricks and mortar." Our efficiency obsession delayed investments in relationship building, but with productivity nearing capacity (at least with human beings,) **investing in people** and their connections is what builds resiliency for organizations. Informal networks are more powerful in the information age because they cut through the noise and can deliver trusted insight that helps with better decision making. [See the BUD/S example pages 94-98]

Team of Teams Core 4



A Common Purpose

The competitive advantage of high-performing teams is their ability to think and act as a seamless unit. But people cooperate only if they **see the interdependent reality** of their environment. Transparency is critical, not just in actions, but also in information sharing and consistent familiarity with each branch of the organization. Everyone must be personally invested in the outcome and focused on the shared mission.

Tips from Team of Teams:

- Ensure that everyone can see more than just their piece of the puzzle. Be more transparent than necessary, even if it's uncomfortable.
- Reiterate the shared purpose often, even if you think it's clear, with emphasis on the goal and each teams part in moving towards it.

Looks like:

- Using a U-shaped table for meetings, with plenty of seats.
- Changing office floor plans to be more open and promote interaction in certain areas.
- Asking teams to share their contributions, and what they think is the mission

Trusting Teams

Small operational teams have a clear, shared sense of purpose, and if they are infused with trust, they are much more potent. Like a sports team where cooperation becomes instinctive over time, teams sharing honestly and cultivating emotional safety creates lasting bonds. However, teamwork is a dynamic and delicate process. Building bridges to other teams may seem inefficient, but McChrystal emphasized the need to create the "messy connectivity" of small teams into more teams, and invest the time to do it.

Tips from Team of Teams:

- Identify "blinks," the choke points between groups. These cultural differences obstruct communication and need to be addressed.
- Normalize sharing and interactive discussion – it's okay to ask questions and it's okay to not know all the answers – having a group work to solve these saves an incalculable amount of time and builds trust.
- Send your best: a six-month exchange program allowed operators to see how the war looked from inside other groups. They learned how to best help that team and built personal relationships, despite some initial resistance.

Looks like:

- Asking good questions with a kind demeanor.
- Pausing when you hit a communication issue to see what's underneath it.
- Encouraging frequent contact between teams to break down the blinks.



Shared Consciousness: Share Until You Think It's Illegal

It's a habit, particularly in parts of the military, to constrain information, partly due to security concerns, but also the **"need to know"** mindset. Efficiency may dictate that knowing only your "piece of the puzzle" is necessary -- but, due to complexity, there may be much more that's relevant. Shared consciousness demanded the adoption of extreme transparency, and McChrystal's Task Force began with a daily Operations and Intelligence briefing that evolved into interactive discussion. Attendees saw problems being solved in real time, and developed the confidence to solve their own similar problems – saving an incalculable amount of time. People could see multiple views of the organization, where their work fit in, and teams learned how other teams saw the same information in a different way.

Tips from Team of Teams:

- Coach people on briefing skills. For example, a 4-minute slot should have a 60 second update, then open-ended conversation.
- Encourage relationship building between teams. Surprise moments of connection and clarity happen with transparency.
- Create a culture where questions are not threatening – encourage and demonstrate good asking and non-defensive answering.

Looks like:

- Interactive conversation rather than performance briefings.
- Adding people to the CC line of emails if there's a chance it might impact them.
- Taking calls on speakerphone for more participation.



Empowered Execution

The success of empowered execution is built on shared consciousness. More decisions were made faster, based on good intelligence routed to the right people to act on it. Bottlenecks were avoided, and leadership only handled decisions that they needed to make, rather than what a past hierarchy might have dictated.

The common purpose, shared consciousness, and trusting teams led to an **"eyes on, hands off"** leadership style. This is explained by McChrystal with the metaphor that a gardener creates an environment in which plants can flourish, and works to maintain it. Creating and leading a truly adaptive organization requires building, leading, and maintaining a culture that is flexible but also durable. *Read more about leading like a gardener here.*

Tips from Team of Teams:

- Say thank you frequently, show interest and enthusiasm.
- Ask questions about recommended plans of action.
- Be a good role model and know that your team is watching.

Looks like:

- Doing rounds without an agenda – offering encouragement as well as advice, but first observing and listening deeply to understand.
- Practicing humility as well as vulnerability ("I made a mistake," "I don't know the answer, let's find out.")

McChrystal Group

McChrystal Group helps you drive the results that matter by unleashing the power of your teams. That's why we've been helping organizations get their teams working better, smarter, and faster for over a decade. Forged in combat and proven across industries, we use our Team of Teams® framework to help you get the most out of your teams, turning them into powerful engines of meaningful change.

Visit *mcchrystalgroup.com* for Team of Teams films, case studies, and the discussion guide.

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