



McChrystal Group

Practical Advice for Leading Through **COVID-19**

A Five-Part Series

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 outbreak has ravaged communities worldwide. Amidst this crisis, organizations have been forced to adapt to global travel restrictions and widespread fear. Leaders are faced with consequential decisions as they lead organizations that are shifting towards a remote work model.

In this five-part series, our McChrystal Group team offers five articles on the major steps organizations must take in order to establish a high-functioning remote work platform.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

Stan McChrystal and Chris Fussell offer a brief history around the key factors that led to the creation of a highly effective, remote collaboration operating model within the Special Operations community.

06 - PART II: REMOTE COMMUNICATION 101

A fundamental review of seven technical systems and meeting structures organizations should have in place that are critical to leading through a remote communications model.

PART III: REMOTE COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

A discussion on best practices for optimizing a remote-communication forum, and individual techniques and behaviors to maximize your team's performance as work styles change.

PART IV: DECISION-MAKING

In a remote work environment, the leadership role is more critical than ever, and a disciplined approach to cascading decision making can be a powerful tool for you and your team. Chris Fussell and Micah Zenko share six behavioral and process changes to kickstart your remote decision-making transformation.

PART V: LEADER'S MINDSET

Stan McChrystal outlines considerations for today's leaders to adjust their thinking and their footing immediately, in order to allow for the possibility to build and maintain a culture of trust, candor, and performance in a distributed workforce.



LEADING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID-19

An Introduction

Part One of a Five-Part Series

By: Stan McChrystal, Founder of McChrystal Group

“Prepare for remote work status...” is a common refrain of the past two weeks, as the global spread of the COVID-19 virus is a seemingly unavoidable reality. And we’re likely to hear far more of this in the days to come.

The warning is a nice way to push for preparation, **but in practice, how should large and complex organizations posture for this eventuality?**

It’s one thing to coordinate a project team of a few dozen folks over remote connectivity – that’s becoming pedestrian in today’s workforce. But if and as the COVID-19 spread continues to have significant impact on how organizations should be communicating and running their businesses, we must switch from bumper-sticker commentary about preparedness to the sleeves-up work of actually implementing a remote system at scale. Attuned leaders need to be preparing for weeks (or more) of remote work status on a massive scale. This is easy to say, but challenging in practice.

At McChrystal, we’ve learned a lot about building the kind of remote and distributed communication model that will be essential in the coming weeks. In the days ahead, our team will offer a quick series of follow-on articles, sharing our best thinking on the major steps any organization must take to establish a high-functioning remote-work platform. They will be both practical and tactical, discussing:

- tools and structure,
- best practices,
- remote decision-making,
- remote client and sales management,
- and long-term mindset/culture shift associated with remote communications.



First, Chris Fussell and I put together our initial thoughts with some context from our careers on how and why it's so important for leaders to approach preparing for the organizational management difficulties COVID-19 presents.

Chris: Nearly 20-years-ago, on September 11th, 2001 I was the senior officer of a 16-person Navy SEAL platoon, the core fighting unit of our branch of the special operations community. To that point in my career, I'd never had to consider the fact that our platoon was a one-tenth part of a larger SEAL Team, and that SEAL Team was a one-tenth part of the broader Navy SEAL force, and that the Navy SEALs were just a small part of the entire Special Operations community. We were a collection of small units, not an enterprise prepared for constant, network-based connectivity.

The events of that day set all of us on a path that would force us to understand the size and scope of who we truly were as an organization. The years after 9/11 would see our units spread around the entire globe, from clusters of hundreds in war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, to outposts of just two or three personnel in remote and isolated corners of the fight.

But if on 9/11 our admirals and generals had said, "we're under attack from a fast-growing global terrorist network... so prepare for remote work conditions," I would have had no idea where to start. And even if I had, I and all of my peers would have had neither the technology nor the methodology to make this possible. Amazingly, I didn't even have a laptop assigned to me at that time!

Stan: The points Chris outlines were serious and grave challenges. No one in our community had foreseen a requirement for constant connectivity amongst thousands of distributed nodes. I'd grown up inside a Special Operations community run through centralized, top-down management. Like any other business, this style of management is dependent on a cascading series of daily, weekly, quarterly and annual meetings, the vast majority of which are face-to-face interactions. After 9/11, that face-to-face model would quickly become a thing of the past, and I would imagine that the expansion of COVID-19 will soon present industry with a similar challenge.

When I took command of our many-thousands-large global counterterrorism units, I knew I needed to create a paradox organization that was both remote and interconnected, decentralized and highly-structured, geographically separated and singularly aligned. Remote-work would be critical to our foundation. "The heartbeat of this organization," I started saying, "will be our ability to be geographically separated, and communicate as if we were in the same room."

The challenges ahead will be very real for leaders in business, but from experience, I know that they are surmountable with focus and intention.

Chris: The interconnected nature of the modern world brings with it countless advantages, but also the very stark reality that a virus like COVID-19 can spread quickly and massively disrupt our way of doing business around the world. In that vein and given the serious nature of this still-unfolding event, we at McChrystal wanted to share a series of key learnings when it comes to building a remote and distributed communication model. This is likely to be a critical part of any large organization's game plan in the weeks and months ahead.

This is, of course, what we do as a business at McChrystal. But the COVID-19 problem is one we will all deal with, and an issue that we will solve globally through sharing of best practices. We acknowledge and caution that building out a truly robust Team of Teams model is a long-term endeavor that can take several quarters, but given the rate with which the COVID-19 spread is likely to impact industry, we hope our forthcoming series will offer a starting point that organizations can put into practice should they find themselves in a days or weeks-long situation of remote connectivity.

Stan: At our core, McChrystal is a mission-driven organization, focused on people performance, and populated by leaders who were raised to put mission first. The singular, global mission we all share today is the quick isolation and irradiation of COVID-19. We hope our insights can serve a small part to that end.



Click above to hear from McChrystal Group Founder Stan McChrystal on the potential impacts of COVID-19 to your organization.



LEADING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID-19

Remote Communication 101

Part Two of a Five-Part Series

By: Chris Fussell, President of McChrystal Group

In our first article in this series, Stan McChrystal and I offered a brief history around the key factors that led to the creation of a highly effective, remote collaboration operating model within the Special Operations community. That transition took time, and involved many missteps and key learnings. Readers interested in a deeper analysis of the roadmap that McChrystal put into practice can find that in our 2017 book, *One Mission: How Leaders Build a Team of Teams*.

But given the urgency with which the COVID-19 outbreak is forcing remote collaboration as a new mandate, we will continue our abbreviated series today with a review of tools and structures that are critical to leading a large organization through a remote-communications model. This is far from exhaustive, but enough to get you pointed in the right direction if you're beginning to tackle this challenge.

- 1. START NOW:** this will take more time than you'd like. Connecting people, even into the thousands, is just a flip of the switch with today's technology. But productive connection that drives effective action is a bigger challenge. If you run a town-hall every quarter and teammates dial-in from around the world, don't assume you're prepared for true remote-work status. Large, top-down forums like most town-halls (even when leveraging remote-connectivity systems) are designed for transmission, not for real dialogue and emergence of insights.
- 2. ANALYZE YOUR IT TOOLS - AND HOME KITS:** You'll need a proper IT backbone in place for remote work at scale, so do a quick analysis here. Most large organizations we work with have these systems at their fingertips (though most are underutilized), while some smaller organizations might not the needed software in place. But there are countless tools that are very accessible and cost effective for remote communication. At McChrystal, we leverage the Microsoft 365 stack for project work, knowledge management, scheduling, and remote communication (both video and text) through the Teams platform. But smaller organizations can quickly assess what they have in place, and find a range of products that are affordable and effective. Don't assume your people have what they need at home. Ask your managers to run a quick survey of home-level readiness of your employees. Do your people have sufficient home bandwidth to support video communication? Are your remote security protocols updated? Are your people familiar and comfortable with this model?



3. **PRACTICE!** Start running meetings that would normally be face-to-face through a remote platform to work out the bugs. You can do this from inside the same building - just separate yourselves and see if the systems are up and running. (In tomorrow's piece, we'll discuss best practices and protocol for remote interaction). Ensure you're assessing both your video/audio capabilities, and your real-time chat platforms. We'll discuss tomorrow how side-conversations over a chat-platform (during a video conference) allow individuals to connect point-to-point and clarify issues, deepen understanding, and maintain person-to-person connectivity.
4. **MAP YOUR OPERATING RHYTHM:** Our time in a traditional office space are filled with scheduled meetings, ad hoc meetings, and chance encounters throughout the day. It's easy to underestimate how much productivity comes from those sidebar discussions, quick gatherings in someone's office, or a chat around the lunch table. Start now looking at the Operating Rhythm of your organization.
5. **BIG TO SMALL:** As you consider the right mix of standing, remote meetings - start big and work your way down. People in your organization will want a place to go to get a single picture of the organization, market, etc from their leaders, but also a forum where they can share up what they're seeing and hearing on the ground. As a thought experiment, imagine the several hundred folks (or more) that you might pull into your quarterly town-hall. What if you started and finished each work week, during purely remote conditions, with all of those team members dialed into a single communication forum? Your remote employees would know, at a minimum, that every 3-4 days they would hear from their leadership, connect with peers across the enterprise, and have a forum to share ground level insights or clarify key issues.

Once the senior-most level of your organization establishes the operating rhythm with which it will communicate broadly with the company, leaders one level down can decide where and how they'll build the necessary supporting communications forums with their teams. This methodology can cascade quickly down to front-line managers and a natural operating rhythm will start to emerge.

But don't just map your existing outlook calendar into an operating rhythm. Your calendar is likely more dependent on the "meeting after the meeting" than you'd assume, and those physical encounters will disappear in a remote situation.

By starting with high-inclusivity at the very top, combined with leaders who are sharing real insights and encouraging dialogue from the bottom up, you'll be amazed at how much useful information will be available quickly to large numbers in your organization. The more aggressive senior leaders are willing to be with inclusion and transparency, the more you can avoid meeting after meeting down into the organization.

6. CREATE AGENDAS: This sounds painfully obvious, but structured agendas are more important than ever in a remote environment. Our suggestion is to write your agenda in excel-format. From left to right, the key columns should be: time (minute by minute), topic, briefer (to include title and contact information), and links to key read-ahead materials. In that way, your agenda is doubling as a knowledge management tool for future reference.

Hang these agendas in the calendar invites – something that is easy to overlook and underestimate. This gives your teammates another KM tool – and ability to look forward and backwards at topics discussed over time.

Do a quick review after each meeting on the effectiveness of the agenda. As dynamic as most business must be these days, if your agenda isn't in a state of constant improvement, you're probably falling behind in some way.

7. ESTABLISH CONTROLLERS: in a remote meeting, you need a single person who is responsible for keeping the group on track. This should not be the person overseeing the meeting, but a support position that keeps introduces the intent of the meeting, keeps it on time and heading by gently reading teammates when things are running over time or getting off heading, and who captures the key points of each topic/discussion.

The controller should quickly clean up the meeting notes, capture any due-outs, and distribute meeting notes broadly to all in attendance. This is yet another knowledge management tool, and the due-out list (where applicable) should be the first thing you start with during the next iteration of that forum. As opposed to a face-to-face environment, where folks are constantly bumping into one another and getting quick updates on project and deal status, a remote system requires great discipline to maintain awareness and accountability. A forum-controller can quickly fill this void.

This is a very high level start point, but we hope it will serve as a baseline for how you can start to structure and execute these types of remote forums. Tomorrow, we will publish a quick look at best practices and behavior norms during these types of forums.





LEADING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID-19

Remote Communication Best Practices

Part Three of a Five-Part Series

By: Chris Fussell, President of McChrystal Group

“Wait...how did you guys have a daily virtual meeting with thousands of people that didn’t turn into complete chaos?”

When I speak with corporate audiences and explain the Team of Teams model that Stan McChrystal designed while commanding a global Special Operations task force, this question comes up nearly every time. In that exceptionally complex and fast-moving environment, McChrystal created a geographically dispersed, remote workforce of thousands around the globe that re-synchronized itself every 24-hours for years on end.

But the current challenge we all face relative to COVID-19, maintaining corporate and economic performance while the threat of a deadly virus spreads quickly, is already requiring many large organizations to go into large-scale, remote work status. **How can an organization do this while maintaining speed, strategic alignment, and cultural cohesion?**

This is part three of our series on tackling the challenges of a large-scale, remote work organization. Today, I’ll discuss best practices for optimizing a remote communication forum, and how a leader can re-create the impact of face-to-face communication. From our time in Special Operations to a decade working with corporate partners, McChrystal has seen this methodology implemented across many sectors, and in organizations from startups to Fortune 10.

In a Part Two, we discussed some of the technical systems and meeting structures you should have in place (IT, agenda construction, an appointed meeting organizer, etc.). Today, we'll dive a bit deeper into individual technique and behavior to maximize your team's performance when work styles change:

- 1. USE VIDEO:** It requires more bandwidth, but the personal connection of seeing a teammate's face far exceeds what a conference call alone can provide. Any good collaboration platform (at McChrystal, we leverage Microsoft Teams) will provide video connectivity that can put people "face-to-face" all the way down to smartphones over existing wireless networks. If your organization doesn't use the video feature today, start practicing now. When bandwidth is constrained, the leader should maintain a video connection even if the other attendees cannot. This allows you to project calm and focus, as well as encouraging people to stay fully engaged in a remote meeting.
- 2. USE CHAT:** We recommend a video platform that will allow chat rooms to run in parallel. Using the chat room attached to the meeting for questions or comments to the group to be posted without constant interruption and confusion. Chat is also a great channel for point-to-point communications around a meeting topic, and general comments that are not time sensitive.
- 3. HAVE A STANDARD, SCRIPTED KICKOFF FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS:** In an office environment, we stroll into meetings, catch the small talk in the hallway, and naturally orient ourselves to the meeting and the people around us. In a remote environment, we're abruptly connected. Be aware of this difference and have a standard opening script. Welcome your team, make it personal, orient them to the meeting's intent. We've all sat through countless painful conference calls where the first five minutes is people talking over each other until someone takes control. The owner of a remote meeting might start with:

"Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for joining. This is Mary Smith, Vice President for Supply Chain. I hope your week is off to a great start! It's 2pm Eastern Time on Tuesday, March 17th, and this is the weekly regional resourcing sync. I run this meeting at this time every week, and the intent is to talk through any resourcing issues from the past seven days, and forecast requirements for the next seven days. It's great to see that we have over 200-folks dialed in today! For those of you joining us for the first time, you should see our agenda on your screen, but if it's not coming through, you'll also find it attached in the calendar invite in your outlook. I'm running this meeting from my home office in St. Louis, and I see that we have folks dialed in from six time zones around the world! We'll capture and send out detailed minutes at the end of this 60-minute meeting. If you have tactical questions throughout this meeting, please use the chat room, which I've asked Peter Jones, my deputy here in St. Louis, to monitor throughout the meeting. With that, let's turn to our first region update..."

In less than a minute, you can quickly align hundreds of teammates around the world. Connect with them, orient them to where they are in virtual meeting space, underscore the intent, and set the parameters through agenda and time allocation. But remember, you'll have new folks joining almost every time in a large and complex organization. Using the standard introduction every meeting will feel repetitive, but your remote employee who can't rely on hallway conversations will appreciate the connection and feel like they're part of the team.

4. OFFER GUIDANCE ON SOUND DISCIPLINE: We've all dealt with the conference call when you can't hear Bob because his Bluetooth is crackly, or Sarah because she's boarding a flight. In normal circumstances, we can live with this. But if large-scale, remote work is the new norm, it is everyone's responsibility to be as clear and crisp as possible—out of respect to others in the meeting and in service to the mission, as possible. We recommend that you establish some standing norms, distribute them, and highlight them regularly.

- Join remote forums from a quiet area out of respect to others on the line
- Introduce yourself with name, title, and location if you ask a question or offer a comment
- Speak at 75% speed and over-articulate your words
- Ensure your microphone is well positioned. Headsets are better than laptop speakers.
- If you're speaking for the first time, ask for a quick sound check (from a specific person! Don't ask 200-people, "can you hear me ok?")
- When you're not speaking – go on mute
- Turn on your video...it's important that we can see each other while we're remote
- Most importantly – assume positive intent. There are challenges with large scale remote collaboration, but we'll figure it out as a team!

5. CALL PEOPLE BY NAME: Don't say, "ok, over to the New York office," but instead, "OK, over to Laura and Mike, our co-heads in New York. Great to see you both, and thanks for dialing in. Really appreciate what you're doing to keep our 50 teammates there tied in, and thanks for the report you posted yesterday. Laura, we'll start with you."

It takes 30 additional seconds, but a little touch from you as a leader can overcome some of the challenges of remotely connecting your team.

6. LET THE MEETING CONTROLLER CONTROL: in our last post, we discussed the importance of a controller who introduces briefers, takes meeting notes, keeps the agenda on heading, and monitors the general chat room for key issues or questions to highlight. The controller isn't the executive hosting the meeting – he or she is the chief of staff, director of operations, or director of finance who knows the whole organization well and can free up the executive to think and ask questions. Allow this person to do their job. If a topic is running over, the controller can gently nudge. "Team, we're a few minutes over on this topic. I'd recommend that Ted and Laura have a side-bar call afterwards and update us all over email." The executive who owns the meeting can always override, but it's a great way to show the other 198-teammates that you're being respectful of their time and focus.

7. HAVE A SCRIPTED CLOSING: just like the opening, have a baseline script that you close with. Thank your teammates, hit some highlights that jumped out at you, give some personal commentary about your focus in the days ahead. This is also a perfect time for things like, "and, happy birthday to Mitch, who is dialed in from his Seattle home office!" Little personal touches like that go an incredibly long way to keep people connected into the culture.

8. TURN OFF YOUR ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE PING SOUNDS: Folks calling in may experience connectivity issues and need to redial. Don't let these glitches disrupt the flow of content.

9. RECORD NOTES, QUESTIONS, AND DECISIONS: This is a knowledge management tool. Record your meetings, and they can be watched by teammates that weren't able to join, and can be available for future reference. This is doubly important for companies operating globally, so you don't force people to dial into meetings at 3am local time routinely.

10. BE GENUINE: Most importantly, if you're running a large, remote forum, try to forget that there are hundreds dialed in. Just be yourself, and talk as if there are teammates on the other end who need to hear from the real-you, and be reassured that they're still part of an effective and cohesive team! This is where leadership matters most.

Each of these tips are small individually – but they add up to a completely different, and radically more effective, remote meeting. They take discipline from the executives and meeting controllers to enforce, but get easier with time and practice. Don't wait until everyone is in a remote-work status to start piloting these rules! Start today, with a few of the steps above, and build up from there.



LEADING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID-19

Decision-Making

Part Four of a Five-Part Series

By: Chris Fussell, President of McChrystal Group and Micah Zenko, Director of Research & Learning

To “slap the table” in military parlance is to firmly decide. Literally, the metaphor refers to how a commanding officer may conclude a group discussion, with a gavel-like closure, hand-to-table, for effect. Figuratively, it conveys decisiveness and accountability. A choice has been made, the choice is collectively understood, and everyone should now move out and execute. But as the COVID-19 response forces businesses to transition to more geographically distributed models for extended periods, we’ll quickly lose these moments of clarity. Early planning on remote decision-making may be the difference between thriving during this period and being beaten by competition that is better postured for remote-work conditions and execution.

Whether you say (or actually) slap the table, consider now more than ever how human-to-human interaction helps clarify the issue, identify points of misunderstanding, and align people on the decision. A swivel of the chair, a raised eyebrow, or a brief sigh are the in-person behavioral tics that tell leaders to continue digging and clarifying before the slap.

So, what happens when an organization’s key stakeholders suddenly cannot gather in one place... for months on end? How do those leaders read the room to ensure the team is aligned then cascade that plan out to a remote workforce? The degrees of separation between strategic intent and front-line interpretation can grow quickly and soon threaten the core of your business.

Humans are tribal in our nature. We cluster, we read body language, we draw context from contact with our teammates. There is not a simple answer here; the precise solution will be different for every organization, but below, you'll find six behavioral and process changes to kick start your remote decision-making transformation.

1. LEAD WITH PURPOSE

First, leaders must clearly and repeatedly articulate their company's vision, strategy, and objectives. In a remote-work environment, leverage every opportunity you have to remind your teammates of these fundamentals of your culture, and work to do so as a real-person, not a verbatim read out of your corporate vision.

For example, a steady refrain from leaders, over remote platforms, saying, "remember team, we exist to serve our clients, and we only accomplish that by being there for our teammates," is a North Star reminder that teammates cannot hear too often from their leaders in a time of great uncertainty.

These foundational concepts should be published in one universally-accessible strategy document that can serve as a North Star for front-line employees who are working at a distance. But don't just hang this on your portal and consider it done. Talk about it in every meeting to keep a remote workforce aligned. In the digital age, you can have this discussion with thousands at one time. Inclusion of that scale will be critical.

2. OVER-COMMUNICATE CONFIDENCE IN YOUR TEAM

Decision-making authority should be delegated down to the lowest appropriate level. Dispersed, front-line employees understand the market conditions and customer needs at a granular, intuitive level. They have unparalleled insights on the best decisions for their local context, often better than headquarters-based executives, and they can reach the right conclusions faster. This degree of delegation requires leaders having faith in the performance and risk-taking of the frontlines. If leaders and their teams are misaligned around risk appetites, teams and individual contributors will default to slower, safer, and smaller decisions.

We're often oblivious to how the second-order effects of geographic proximity solve for some of these issues. If I'm that front-line teammate, I can get clarity about my boss's intent through a quick chat in the hallway, or through the peers to my left or right. When I'm remote, this becomes orders of magnitude harder. Most normal people hunker down and default to inaction when direction is unclear and authorities are vague. Leaders should fight this by constantly and consistently telling their teammates, *"there will be points of uncertainty as we're separated, but I trust this team, and I trust you to make decision X. Take action when you know the time and opportunity is right."*

After your team starts making new decisions, small changes in tone and reaction by you, the leader, will have magnified impact on their future decisions. Encouragement, support, coaching will breed confidence and openness. Second-guessing and *"this is how I would have done that differently"* interventions will erode or eliminate any gains you've made in empowering your remote workforce. Remember, in a remote-work environment, you are on stage with your organization. Be very intentional about your language and approach, as the impact will be amplified.



3. RE-EVALUATE SUCCESSFUL DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORKS AND SET DECISION BOUNDARIES WHERE POSSIBLE

Distance will change the way your people interact to make decisions. In remote environments, an instant message to ask a question might feel more disruptive than a chair-swivel in an open office floor plan. A quick call to a teammate who you've not seen in person for two-weeks sounds far more intimidating than to someone you saw at their desk an hour ago. The desire not to intrude on others, and to hesitate before asking for clarification or information, is dangerous—especially when an urgent decision arises in a dispersed organization.

Leaders must fight this. During remote-work conditions, leaders must constantly emphasize, “this is not business as usual. Leverage technology to remain connected. Reach out far more often than you normally would. You won't see your teammates in the hallway, so pick up the phone, send a quick text just to say good morning, etc. Our culture will live on these platforms for a few weeks, and we each play a role in this.”

We recommend a very aggressive, detailed mapping of decision-space authorities in your organization. A remote, decentralized environment can't be a linear, back-and-forth system of giving direction, taking action, waiting for next set of orders. Instead, begin now to clearly define the decisions that each individual or team is expected to make.

In our experience, the simplest way to start this is at the top.

- Consider the decisions you hold at your level on any given day, then ask how many of those decisions you can push down one level.
- This will inform your design and implementation of the meeting cadence needed so that the next level down has access to the information required to support their decision authorities.
- Repeat this process by level, and you'll find that your frontline is now far more empowered with decision authorities.

Document, publicize, and adapt decision-space authorities so there is a regular understanding of who owns what decisions. There won't be a hallway for you to sort this.

4. ESTABLISH CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

The “Did you meet your numbers?” question is a banal form of accountability. A glance at a simple spreadsheet can answer it. What senior leaders should care about is whether the decisions that their teams are making are having measured and demonstrated outcomes. In remote work environments where information is often stripped of context, clear substantive results that align with the strategy are harder to come by. For this reason, ownership and accountability is critical.

In remote work environments, work on creating a new form of accountability – one that mitigates against vague and non-contextual forms of written communication. Challenge yourself as a leader to ask building questions, not binary ones. “Why is that working so well, in your opinion?” creates far more opportunity for dialogue than does something like, “great job for hitting your numbers on that product!” The latter might feel more positive to one individual but is top-down and does little to create a culture of connected ideas.

5. BROADCAST DECISION MILESTONES: PHASE 1 VERSUS PHASE 2

So far, we have mostly addressed the culture you should create for empowerment and decision-making for routine decisions. When you face a strategic decision, the organization needs you to be much clearer, over-communicate, and over-share throughout your decision-making process.

We find an easy framing tool you can use is telling your team when you are in Phase 1 or Phase 2, a simple way to help your team know what sort of input to give.

Phase 1: you are still in the information collection and analysis phase, and you're open to new options and perspectives.

Phase 2: you've made a decision and now you're transitioning to how we will execute the plan.

For example, when a leader suggests a solution, they can say, "I see us as still Phase One on this, but it seems to make sense that we push the deadline by two weeks." That tells her team, I'm seeing it like this (phase one), but I need your thoughts and input. Don't let me bias this outcome.

Alternatively, and especially in a remote-work environment, a leader can say, "OK, great discussion. Based on the input, I see us in Phase Two – we're going to push this deadline by two weeks." Here, her team is hearing a clear and declarative statement; I'm convinced, and here is the decision. When we hang up, execute against that plan.

A simple system like this will help your remote teammates know how to help, without the benefit of the normal body language cues, hallway conversations, and head-nods that we're all masters at transmitting and receiving during face-to-face work.



Click above to hear from McChrystal Group President Chris Fussell on decision-making through the COVID-19 crisis.



6. TRUST MORE THAN EVER

Simply put, trust is the glue that binds people during heightened times of crisis and it is even more crucial amongst widely-dispersed organizations. Maintaining, and even improving, the trust between teammates who have suddenly lost the ability to interact physically is challenging but possible.

This requires leaders to:

- vigilantly communicate with increased regularity (increasing the regularity and breadth of how you communicate);
- maintaining an intentionally positive and prosocial voice coupled with an honest view on the situation;
- demonstrating empathy over organizational frustrations;
- and expressing authentic concern for the challenges facing your organization and your individual teammates.

This degree of trust includes the assumption that remote decision-makers are not acting with bad intent when their choices seem - from a distance - unwise or uncertain.

Decisions sit at the heart of every business, whether the essential decision-makers are able to slap the table in person or not. In a remote-work environment, your role as a leader is more critical than ever, and a disciplined approach to cascading decision-making can be a powerful tool for you and your team.



LEADING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE UNCERTAINTY OF COVID-19

Leader's Mindset

Part Five of a Five-Part Series

By: Stan McChrystal, Founder of McChrystal Group

A few years after 9/11, I found myself leading the global counterterrorism Task Force in Iraq during the most brutal years of the fight against Al Qaeda. On one fateful evening, we learned of a fast approaching, critical opportunity. We had located Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. After hours of intense focus we struck the terrorist leader, but then the battlefield entered into a state of controlled chaos: follow-up on the initial strike, then seventeen additional raids across Iraq to paralyze his network. We were already several years into operating at a breakneck, 24/7 pace. But I knew we had finally learned to harness the full power of virtual collaboration.

As we reviewed the intelligence relating to Zarqawi, and prosecuted other operations, the clock approached the time of an event we had long planned. Earlier that day we had conducted our daily video teleconference (with thousands dialed in) from which we ran our global task force – synchronizing our counterterrorism efforts across not only Iraq, but the globe. And now, early evening at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, but late night in Iraq, we conducted a farewell of one of our Deputy Commanders and his family who were leaving for another assignment after three years of extraordinary service.



Back at home the farewell was a touching personal event with my wife and other family members in a social setting for what was traditionally a round of tributes, some modest gifts to the departing family, and an opportunity for them to say goodbye. As was our culture, some of the tributes and gifts were wickedly humorous in nature and it was a chance for otherwise stoic warriors to express deep feelings in our own way.

That night, although the room was full, the vast majority of our force was deployed to the fight and spread across 27 countries. But they were there for the farewell. Leveraging our video-teleconference backbone, and our practiced expertise in its use, we connected ourselves virtually – and emotionally. The tributes and humor flowed freely. The funniest was a Sergeant Major participating from Islamabad, Pakistan who came on impersonating a head-of-state (Command Sergeant Major “Gunny” Barreras was later killed in combat in Afghanistan). Despite the physical distance between us, in the midst of a busy evening, we strengthened the bonds of a war-worn force.

While it may sound strange, we didn’t cancel or postpone that very personal event; we conducted a global, virtual teleconference farewell for an important leader and friend while on the other side of a plywood wall another section of our team monitored critical operations happening a few towns away from where I stood. We were a team, and a family, that was simultaneously managing battlefield action and organizational culture. The farewell lasted about an hour (with me and other receiving periodic updates throughout), and then we walked back to the operations floor.

It was the clearest example of what we had built: a global team operating at a 24/7 pace, managing time-sensitive and life-and-death decisions, while maintaining a strong, trust-filled, relationship-based culture.

However, this wasn’t always the case. When we pivoted the Task Force to a remote footing shortly after 9/11, there were many lessons to be learned along the way. As the senior leader of the team, I was confident that we would quickly get the process right - I just didn’t know what the path would look like. But I wasn’t sure how my team of more than 20,000 people around the world could possibly feel like they were part of any singular enterprise. How could we maintain our cultural cohesion and our trust in teammates – most of whom would now go for months or years without ever being face-to-face?

Until the recent rise of COVID-19, I’ve not seen a threat to traditional organizational structure and operations as disruptive as Al Qaeda proved to the US military. What we found in our years of experimentation and ultimate re-wiring of how we operated was a set of lessons I hope you can learn from.

In the last fight, we established an early guiding principle: anything and everything about how we operate is open to change. *We will make many errors along the way, but we will not fail. We will exist and thrive long after this enemy.* I believed I held a sacred promise to the organization to build the team that could win – everything else deserved constant scrutiny. We would adjust our strategy, communications, decision-making, infrastructure, methodology, and processes – but we never lost sight of winning.

Today’s leaders must adjust their thinking, and their footing, immediately. Your new norm is to adapt to remote work with little warning or planning, for an indefinite period of time. The hidden bonds that acted as a sort of glue for your team – the hallway conversations, the quarterly offsites, attending key client meetings together – have evaporated almost instantaneously, and you’re left forming a new culture and way of working in flight.

Building and maintaining a culture of trust, candor, and performance is possible in a distributed work-force; we did this for years on end. But your mindset as a leader must shift today, and dramatically. I recommend you consider the following:

1. COMMUNICATE WITH GREATER INTENSITY AND REGULARITY.

Don't just execute your normal outlook calendar remotely. In a time of change, the organization should hear from their leaders, in some form, multiple times per week. I recommend any text-based email you send company-wide is also accompanied with a video that transmits the same message so people can hear and see you. Open up your meetings to a broader audience – context is more important than ever. In my military role, I modified my daily staff meeting into an open communication forum that lasted 90-minutes and included 7500 people, 7-days per week. Determine the pace your environment is changing – and that must be the new cadence of your meetings.

2. BE INCLUSIVE.

Don't just invite people by layer. Consider a daily video forum that anyone in your organization can join. In times of crisis, people will be looking to their leaders for calm and accurate information - ensure they are invited to those conversations.

3. KNOW THE LIMITS OF YOUR CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM.

Every CEO I've spoken to this week has established some form of COVID-19 contingency planning and response team. Good. But the most important thing isn't what they are doing, it is what everybody else is thinking. Allow your crisis response team to operate, but spend the bulk of your time communicating to your organization at large and make sure people are returning to the projects and products that your customers need so they can get back in action.

4. THE CAMERA IS YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND.

- Be real. The camera makes us act scripted. Talk to the camera as if you're taking face to face with real people.
- Refer to people by name, not by office or city. Take the extra few seconds to say hello to Karen, wish her happy birthday, or ask her how her kids are doing. Doing this in front of thousands of other listeners isn't wasting time. It's telling people you're still a family of teammates. If you don't automatically know all the names, ask your leaders at various locations to provide lists and photos – it will pay dividends to show that you care enough to know who they are.
- Be conscious of your body language in a remote setting. Swiveling around in your chair, looking at your phone, or going on and off camera repeatedly will distract the team and add to their sense of disconnect. You are on stage. Be present and aware of that fact. It's now part of your job description.
- Most importantly, create dialogue. Don't ask yes or no questions. Ask why. Ask what it means to others. Ask what they think about a new insight. Ask anything that forces longer-form answers, if nothing else, simply to build conversation in the virtual-environment.
- Finally, ensure your team has a disciplined plan in place for remote communication. We've covered these tactics in depth in Parts One through Four.

More than anything, leaders must immediately acknowledge that things have already changed for the unforeseeable future – and start taking action now. History shows us time and again that the best leaders move before they're forced to. If you're waiting for a directive in a time of unprecedented events, you're already losing the fight. As my Navy leaders always liked to remind their Army teammates, “you can't turn a ship that isn't moving.”

It's your job as a leader to keep the ship in motion. You can adjust the plan as you go, but inertia is a bigger threat right now than a few wrong choices. **In this moment of international crisis, history will remember the vanguard leaders that stepped into the arena first and took action.**

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