



This year, people across the world have faced challenges on a shocking scale. Environmental disasters, economic hardships, social unrest and violence have impacted the lives of millions on multiple continents, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have touched every corner of the globe. Leaders in both the public and private sectors must grapple with the fallout of these conditions and adapt.

Nearly every industry has been thrust into a period of uncertainty and change in 2020. Our military has taken intensive action to protect our forces and re-examine ways to bolster greater resilience and flexibility. This year's challenges further underscore the value of putting people first.

When I was young, I joined the military, never dreaming that I'd still be wearing this uniform 37 years later. From the global standoff during the Cold War, to Desert Storm, and the last two decades of conflicts in the Middle East, I served with some of the most amazing Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen. I want to share my memory of one.

In the spring of 2003, I commanded a battalion of about 600 paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division spread throughout Eastern Afghanistan. A fire broke out near one of our outposts and one of our senior noncommissioned officers, John Setzer, was seriously injured while evacuating wounded teammates. I visited John at his hospital bed in Bagram less than 24 hours after the incident. Though clearly in pain, and unable to speak with his face encased in bandages, he was determined to sit up and salute.

To this day, that image moves me. It wasn't that he saluted me. You see – John would have done that for any officer. He was a leader, and he was so dedicated to being a professional, to doing his duty, and to caring for his people, that no amount of personal risk or discomfort would deter him from those priorities. John was subsequently awarded the Silver Star for his singular heroism on that spring day in 2003. Two years later, John was still leading Soldiers, and he recalled that his only regret was the lives lost. His passion for his people was inherent.

For the next generation of leaders, it falls on you to cultivate men and women like John Setzer. Regardless of your specific industry, you have incredible talent and energy flowing through your organization every day. If unified in purpose and commitment, they can do wonders. It's up to you to inspire, encourage, and unite them.

This isn't easy. It requires character and courage, both moral and sometimes physical, to establish and uphold a clear set of values. It requires vision and the ability to communicate effectively to your entire team. It requires personal passion and energy to stick through hard times and imbue your people with an unwavering pursuit of excellence. It requires an eye for managing (and accepting) risk and failure to engender a spirit of innovation that will enable your organization to flourish in times of change.

I must admit – while there are challenges for our nation, I'm hopeful about the future. The young people I see in our military and elsewhere give me great confidence that the next generation has the tools to tackle the monumental challenges foreshadowed in 2020. Be confident. Be bold. Be committed to providing your people with the best leadership possible. If you can do those things, you'll be amazed at the results.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard D. Clarke".

General Richard D. Clarke
Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command
(USSOCOM)