



Stanley McChrystal

EDITORS' NOTE General Stanley McChrystal, a retired four-star general, was the former commander of U.S. and International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan where he developed and implemented a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy. He is a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, where he teaches a course on leadership. He also sits on the boards of JetBlue Airways and Fiscal Note. McChrystal is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and the Naval War College. He also completed year-long fellowships at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and at the Council on Foreign Relations.

COMPANY BRIEF McChrystal Group (mccbrystalgroup.com) was founded in 2011 as a global advisory services and leadership development firm led by a diverse mix of professionals from the military, intelligence community, academia and private sector who specialize in transforming stagnant and siloed organizations into cohesive, adaptable "teams of teams." This broad spectrum of expertise delivers innovative leadership solutions to American businesses to help them transform and succeed in challenging, dynamic environments.

Will you discuss your vision for writing your new book, *Leaders: Myth and Reality*?

There are two parts to this: the first is that I think the discussion of leadership in our nation, and the world more broadly, has become very tactical. It has evolved into arguing about Tweets or other forms of social media discussion. I really wanted to step back and look at leadership, not from a management perspective, but based on the bigger ideas of leadership.

I had written my memoirs in 2010 and had published them in 2013. When I did that, it was a humbling experience because I was writing a book in which I was the star of the show. However, I found out that many of the things in which I thought I had been the main actor were, in fact, more complex than I had understood at the time. I wasn't driving all the outcomes like I thought I was.

Defining Leadership

An Interview with General Stanley McChrystal, Founder and Partner, McChrystal Group

We conducted detailed interviews on critical operations and I found out there were all these things going on below the waterline that I was unaware of that really affected the outcome.

I started to come to the conclusion that we think about leaders in a simplistic way, so this book was an attempt to educate myself and the team about that.

Is this book directed to the younger generation looking to enter into leadership roles or does it address those already in these positions today?

I hope it addresses both. If people who are in leadership roles now, or who are just about to be, try to fill the stereotypical role that simplified histories exemplify, they'll find it almost impossible to do. One can't just emulate Abraham Lincoln who is depicted in a very simple way in some books, for instance. Leadership is much more complex than that.

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I would like the reader not only to be informed but, in some ways, to find it a little bit reassuring to realize that everyone is human.

For younger people, it will educate them that leadership is very difficult. At best, it is done well, but it can never be done perfectly. Helping people gain a more realistic view of what leadership is, and what it can be, can be helpful.

Leadership has been a passion of yours throughout your career. Where did this interest develop?

My father was a soldier, so I equated soldier with leader very early. When I was a young man, he was a Combat Commander in Vietnam, so I equated that kind of leadership with being selfless, responsible and courageous.

I wanted to be like that and to learn how to motivate people and take care of them. I was able to go to West Point where a lot of time is spent trying to point students in that direction.

With each passing year, leadership layers are revealed to me that were unknown to me as a young person. I had read books about it, but when I experienced the many layers of leadership, it became increasingly difficult as I got to higher levels. I found it fascinating to try to understand.

When I was younger, I wanted a list of the top eight to ten leadership traits that, if I absorbed and displayed competently, would make me a good leader. Then I found out that there is no way that this necessarily equates to successful leadership.

The longer I have been in leadership roles, the more I've transitioned from just trying to be a good leader to trying to more thoroughly understand what leadership actually is.

Can leadership skills be taught or is this something a person is born with?

Everybody is born with certain traits and qualities and, if one is naturally charismatic and empathetic, they are likely to be a better leader than someone who may not have those same gifts. However, the vast majority of people know how to be honest and how to do many of the things that make an effective leader. Whether they have the self-discipline to actually do that day in and day out is a different matter.

As a soldier, some of these lessons are taught by example. However, some of those who were acting as the example were surprising. I have sometimes had people who were junior to me teach me more real leadership lessons just by their conduct and the way they treated other people than I have learned virtually anywhere else. Surrounding people with leaders can go a long way toward taking them as far as their potential will allow them to go.

You place a great importance around having personal heroes to learn from. How critical was that for you in your life and, for young people today, how important is it for them to find personal heroes?

It's essential. When I was young, I was into Greek and Roman mythology, and the likes of Roland and King Arthur were early heroes. As I began to study American history, the icons like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were people that I was instinctively attracted to.

As I matured and read more thoughtful biographies, I started to realize that every one of these people had their own challenges – many of them started with difficult obstacles in front of them and many made some very big mistakes. I came to understand that they're all very human.

In many ways, that is reassuring because it reminds us that everyone has problems and challenges. It also takes away some of the excuses. If someone like Ulysses S. Grant could have issues like alcohol abuse and still persevere and accomplish what he did, it causes people to wonder why they're making excuses. Examples are extraordinarily important, but the examples must be realistic – they shouldn't have all the edges sanded off of them.

Do the leadership skills that you developed in the military translate to the business world?

They translate well. Most of the things I learned in the military were very positive – treat people like human beings, don't order soldiers around because they don't respond well to that, they respond well to asking. These things transferred remarkably well.

The military makes a big deal about being selfless. Most of the people who are in the military are there because they want to be there, but leading people who have completely different interests and backgrounds than you is something they have to open their minds to.

What was your desire in creating McChrystal Group and will you discuss its focus and mission?

I had just come out of the military and wanted to form a company with people that I trusted and cared about deeply. I wanted to come to work every day with people I like and admire. To be honest, if I was able to do that, it didn't really matter what business we were doing. I just wanted to make sure that, whatever we did, we did well.

We ended up forming a leadership advisory firm that helps other firms build trust, while also remaining adaptable and ready for changing environments. By assembling a team of people that we really care about, we found that we created an ethos in the organization that ensures that we take care of each other as we pursue our mission of making our clients successful.

This approach has been well accepted in this world of consulting. We have found that it provides something that people value very much. We spend a lot of time building relationships with our clients that last for a long time.

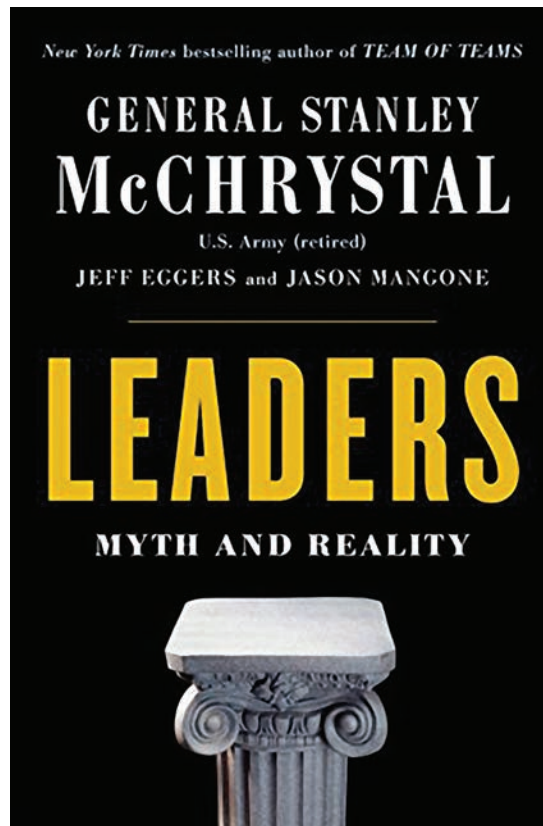
All of the mysteries of the business world that we were all a little intimidated about when we started really boil down to treating people well, delivering for clients, and getting up in the morning and caring about clients and their welfare more than our own. If we continue to do this, the rest of it just seems to work out.

As a student of leadership, are you confident the inspirational leaders needed today are out there and are willing to accept leadership roles?

Those kinds of leaders exist but, if anything, they might be dormant or staying slightly below the surface because we don't seem to reward the leader who accepts personal responsibility for failure as much as we do for success. We don't seem to celebrate the leaders who want to compromise between varying viewpoints and who want to find something that everyone can live with as opposed to something that pleases one particular group.

We don't seem to value the leader who admits their own limitations, who says, I'm human and the best I can do is assemble good people so that combined talent will give us a better outcome.

Instead, we seem to celebrate the idea that the leader must be taller, smarter, more charismatic, etc. than everyone else and I don't think that is right.



We also don't seem to embrace values like we did at one time. I do understand the need to avoid searching for perfection. I don't believe that every leader must be without failure. At the same time, if we aren't looking for leaders who are trying to be better and to help us be a better society, then we miss the opportunity to ever be inspired again.

We shouldn't be angered by our leaders – we should be inspired by them. Even if they aren't perfect, they're out there punching away and trying to be as good as they can.

We're going to have to find those leaders again. We may have scared off some people recently, but we can call them back.

What do you tell young people about the impact and value of military experience and public service?

The first thing I start with is the concept of citizenship. I tell people that the United States

of America was formed by a bunch of people who came together and essentially established a covenant between them that said, we are going to form this country and, if we get it right, there are going to be certain rights that come with it and there are also going to be a number of responsibilities that come with it.

Today, people feel that if they vote and pay taxes, then they checked the box of being a good citizen. That is far less than what we should expect from those in our society. If we go back 150 years, a certain level of public engagement was expected and it pulled people together.

We have lost so much of that and, yet, I think one only learns that from experience. I'm the chairperson for Service Year Alliance, which is a renewed effort to try to give every young person in America the opportunity to do a year of paid service. That is not just military; it could also be in healthcare, education, etc.

I think that anyone who participated in this would have an increased value in the job market. They would also have the opportunity to work with people who are not from their zip code and would start to see things more broadly.

The idea that we owe something to society at large is habit forming. If one does this early in life, they then feel that it is something that is worth continuing into the future.

This could also help heal some of the splits in our society. Right now, people often don't like or are suspicious of the people they don't know or deal with regularly. Taking a year of one's life and committing it to service of others changes one's appreciation of others and sense of what is important.

I try to sell every young person on this, but the harder sell is not the young people; there is a much greater appetite from young people to be a part of this than there is a willingness from my generation to pay for it.

We're trying to expand the public/private partnership behind this and that is going to take a national effort.

Did writing the book give you the opportunity to reflect back on your life?

It did. I did the research myself and spent a lot of time reading and reflecting. In the writing process, I tried to add an understanding of what I currently think and feel about the events in my life. Each of the three books that I've been involved in have been a journey. However, it probably would have been more productive if I had done this book first and studied these leaders and then tried to take on the memoirs. I would have processed a number of things differently. It's a foreseen function to rethink things.

Every time I write a word for a book, I keep thinking that this is what I'm saying for the rest of my life – what is on that page is going to stay there long beyond my life. Therefore, I really think about what I want to say. I don't want to settle scores or write about those that irritate me. I want the book to reflect the best of me and pull me up and make me a better person in the process of writing it. I believe every one of my books has done that for me. ●