

Detect, Assess, Respond and Learn

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

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 sits on the boards of Navistar International Corporation, Siemens Government Technology and JetBlue Airways.



Stanley McChrystal

He has recently completed his latest book, *RISK: A User's Guide*. His memoir, *My Share of the Task*, as well of his previous book, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, were New York Times bestsellers. He also co-authored *Leaders: Myth and Reality*, a Wall Street Journal bestseller. McChrystal is the Chair of the Board of Service Year Alliance where he advocates for a future in which a year of full-time service is a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and the Naval War College. McChrystal also completed year-long fellowships at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and at the Council on Foreign Relations.

FIRM BRIEF McChrystal Group (mcchrystal-group.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 provide an overview of McChrystal Group and discuss your vision for creating the firm?

McChrystal Group is a unique consulting firm designed to enable our clients to operate with speed and effectiveness in today's increasingly complex environment. From the outset, we sought to build a diverse team of professionals, including Special Operations veterans from the

fight against Al Qaeda, and leverage insights gained from that experience to partner with clients in transforming themselves to better compete and win.

How has McChrystal Group evolved over its first decade in business?

In the 11 years since our founding, McChrystal Group has deepened our experience and expertise in a range of business sectors, from healthcare to banking, while expanding our capabilities to include AI-based analytics that offers clients a sophisticated look at

their organizations, and the McChrystal Group Academy that offers a range of leadership development programs.

What interested you in writing your new book, *RISK: A User's Guide*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey through the book?

In the past few years, with more time to observe, study and reflect, I concluded that my approach to risk throughout my career, like many other leaders, focused too often on external threats rather than on the internal actions I could take to make my organization more resilient. Our new book explores how we are often our own greatest risk, but that we have the ability to change that.

Who is the book targeted to and who are you hoping to reach with its message?

The book is written for anyone that deals with risk – which means all of us. We hope to show leaders that taking a proactive approach

to strengthening their organization's resistance to risks of all kinds will pay off in countless ways.

You and your team were at the center of the COVID response throughout the past year and a half, helping states set up fusion cells to coordinate action across branches and agencies of government. Will you discuss this work and lessons learned from these efforts?

COVID-19 was an almost classic example of a threat that emerged and found many organizations and governments unable to respond effectively. It wasn't a failure of science. The pandemic was long-expected and followed a predictable pattern, but organizational failures hindered the mounting of a coherent defense and the world has suffered as a result. McChrystal Group's work focused on the basics of communication, coordination, decision-making and overcoming inertia – and produced often dramatic results. COVID has reinforced the reality that many risks can never be avoided, only responded to effectively.

How do you feel U.S. leadership has dealt with COVID-19 and what could have been done differently?

The United States' response to COVID-19 can only be considered a disappointing failure. Despite an advanced medical system and a disproportionate wealth in resources, Americans were infected, got sick and died in far higher numbers than can be justified. Almost every shortcoming was self-inflicted. Failure to communicate a unified narrative and rally a national

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response, spasmodic decision-making, the politicization of proven public health measures, and other missteps reflected a nation and population ineffectively mobilized against a lethal foe. Despite an almost miraculous scientific success in developing vaccines, our inability to fully leverage its power to protect reflects our inability to act in our own best interests. Our leaders have failed us – and we have failed to select and demand more of them.

What needs to be done to better manage the capacity to effectively respond to threats and future risks?

An organization or society's ability to respond to emerging risks depends upon an integrated system – a series of factors like effective communication, correct timing, leveraging diverse capabilities and leadership. The system need not be perfect, but we must have the ability to Detect, Assess, and Respond to risks – and then Learn from the experience to be better prepared for the next risk. The system, which can be called a “risk immune system,” functions similarly to the human immune system and must be protected and strengthened to maintain its health. That requires an intentional effort by leaders.

How critical is it to focus on lessons learned from the pandemic in order to be better prepared for unforeseen events?

It is essential to learn from the experience and mistakes that have been made during COVID; we cannot afford to repeat them. But it would be ill-advised to be so focused on the specific items that fell short that we ignore the systemic failures. Each emerging threat – a new pandemic or onrushing asteroid – demands a different response, but all require the ability to Detect, Assess, Respond, and Learn.

How did your military training and experience prepare you to effectively evaluate and manage risk?

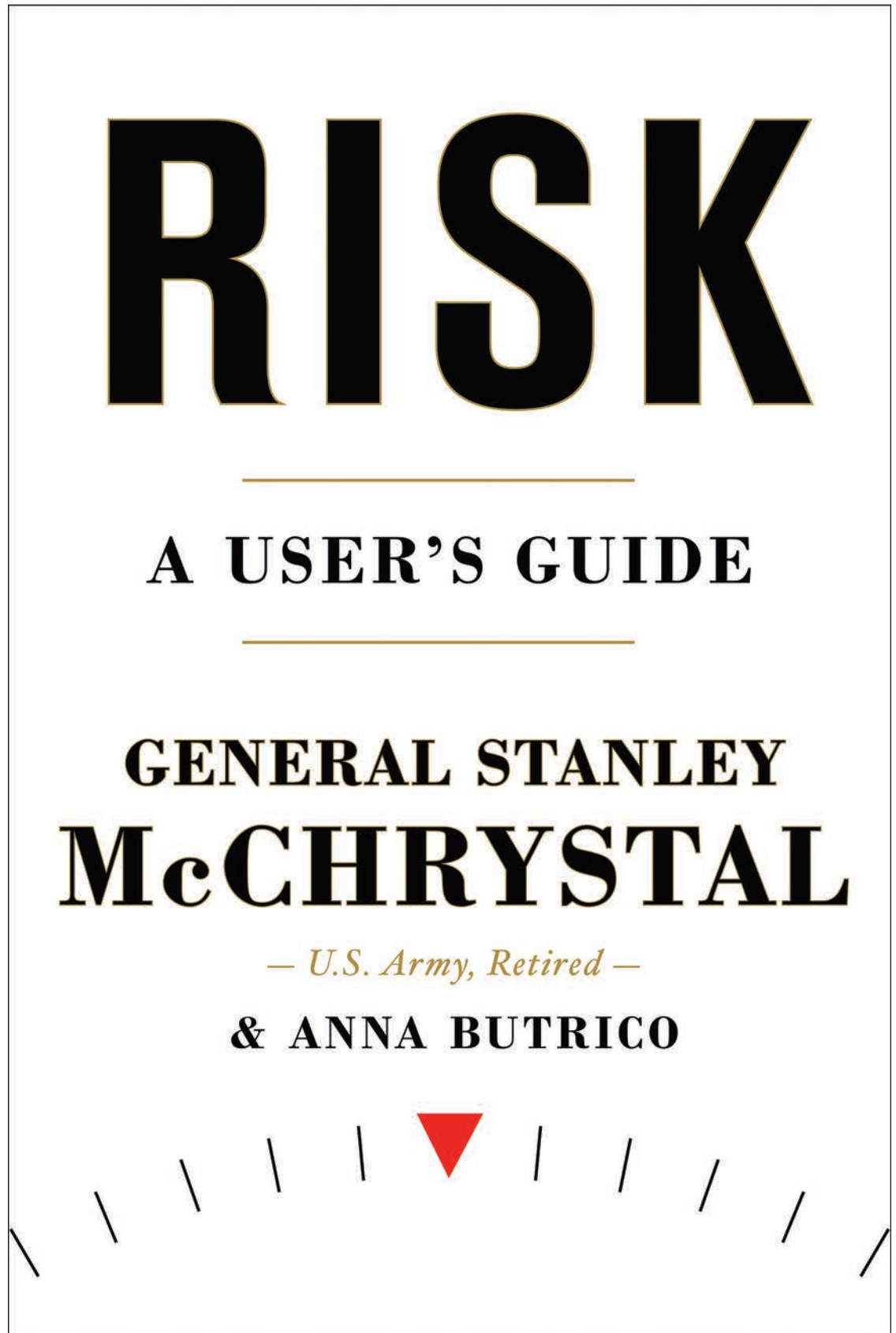
While it was never perfect, the military's habit of planning in detail, but then questioning the assumptions used in planning, in pressure testing plans with war games and tabletop exercises, and with conducting brutally honest after-action reviews, helped to build the capabilities to respond to threats – both expected and unexpected. Additionally, the strong focus on unit cohesion and small-unit leadership provided invaluable sinew.

How concerned are you about the power of propaganda and misinformation that is so prevalent in society today?

The unprecedented capability to transmit information, accurate or inaccurate, represents the most existential threat of my lifetime. Some will scoff and say that nuclear weapons are more lethal, but we've seen that the ability to inspire and mobilize people with misinformation produces movements and actions that are incredibly powerful and almost impossible to control.

Will you discuss your thoughts about the four tests leaders and teams can use to evaluate their communication?

Effective communication relies upon (1) the physical ability to transmit information, (2) the sender's willingness to pass it, (3) the



information's accuracy, and, finally (4) the ability of the recipient to receive and understand it. Too often we forget or assume “yes” on one or more of these essential tests and are surprised when communication is ineffective. Communication is literally a prerequisite for an organization to function, and yet is often left unquestioned.

Do you feel that resilience can be taught or is it a trait that a person is born with?

While there are some personal traits from birth that can be helpful, I think resilience is

the product of personal development. At its heart, individual resilience begins with a person's gaining clarity of their values and sense of self-identity. Absent that mooring, it is difficult to respond to adversity. So, developing resilience begins with values, can be increased with the study of others (particularly history), and then is honed with personal experience. Nothing increases confidence and the ability to rebound from setbacks better than having done it before. ●