

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 88: Stanley McChrystal, Part 2

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Tim Ferriss: Hello, ladies and germs. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss Show where my job is to deconstruct, and sometimes interview, world class performers ranging from chess prodigies to hedge fund managers, professional athletes to, in this case, a masterful commander and military mind, Stanley McChrystal. This is Part 2. In Part 1, we delved into all sorts of different subjects. As a bit of bio, Stanley McChrystal retired from the US Army as a four star general after more than 34 years of service. Former defense secretary, Robert Gates, described him as “perhaps the finest warrior and leader of men in combat I have ever met.”

He was credited with the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq when he served as commander of the Joint Special Operations Command, JSOC. That was from 2003 to 2008. And the follow up questions are really fun. So in this particular episode, he answers questions such as if he could put a billboard anywhere and write anything on it, one billboard, where would it be and what would it say? What are three tests or practices from the military that civilians could use to help develop mental toughness? What are his favorite documentaries or movies? Why?

What \$100.00 or less purchase has most positively impacted his life in the last 12 months, etc.? And a bunch of questions from you guys who submitted them and asked for this Part 2. So please check out Stan McChrystal, check out McChrystal Group, and, again, that’s spelled M-C-C-H-R-Y-S-T-A-L. And without further ado, here is Stan McChrystal.

Stanley McChrystal: Answers to 11 questions by Stan McChrystal. Question 1. What are three tests or practices from the military that civilians could use to help develop mental toughness? The first is to push yourself harder than you believe you’re capable of. You’ll find new depth inside yourself. The second is put yourself in groups who share difficulties, discomfort. We used to call it shared privation. You’ll find that when you have been through that kind of difficult environment that you feel more strongly about that which you’re

committed to. And finally, create some fear and make individuals overcome it.

Things in the military like maneuvering under live fire or doing parachute jumps all make a person more resilient over time. Question 2, what is the greatest attribute of an excellent soldier that you wish all politicians had?

I'd say it's modest servant leadership. We're in an era now where politicians are forced to think about their own re-election, about their own marketing, about what they must do to maintain popularity or stature. And that's almost in contradiction to what we really hope in leaders is that they have a sense that they serve individuals, but they do it in a modest, self effacing way. Question 3, what was your biggest frustration with being in the military? And what is your biggest frustration being out of the military? Clearly, my biggest frustration in the military was the bureaucracy. From Day 1, I hated it.

Waiting in line or dealing with rules that didn't make sense would drive me crazy. But the biggest frustration with being out of the military is, many times, having to search for that higher purpose that most soldiers share. Even when jobs are difficult or frightening, or they can be very, very frustrating, there is shared sense of purpose among soldiers, particularly in combat, that rises them to some new level of effectiveness.

The next question, what is the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze methodology, we call it F3EA, and how did your approach change over time? F3EA, or find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze is a targeting methodology. It, essentially, says we will first find an enemy target, fix it in location to ensure it hasn't moved. Then, we'll finish it, that was a capture or kill operation. We'll then exploit the information, the computers, the documents and other information we gathered, and then, finally, we'll analyze that information and draw conclusions from it to allow us to repeat this cycle and continue after the enemy.

When we began, we had the different parts of F3EA conducted by different organizations, often in silos, without an understanding of the overall product of what they were doing.

So individuals who would do the find would collect signals intelligence, for example, wouldn't really understand who they were collecting on or how that fit into the broader effort. And so clearly, they were less able to nuance their effort or be as

motivated. What we did was we pulled that entire cycle together, shared information across all of it so that all of the participants had the complete view of what we were trying to do in the process and the importance of its outcome. And we found the blinks or losses as we passed information reduced.

And then, the sense of ownership, commitment to it increased dramatically across the organization. Next question, what can low to mid level management do to encourage a more decentralized, agile, and flexible work environment? I'd say, first, you can reduce limiting rules. So if you put rules that say people have to do things a certain, or they can't do this, or they can't do that, you're really creating excuses for not accomplishing the tasks.

I would have done it, but I couldn't do this. I couldn't spend this amount of money. I couldn't travel. And so what I believe is reduce those limiting rules. Obviously, there's got to be clear guidance about doing nothing illegal or immoral or outside of certain limits that are constraints of the organization. But other than that, give people a challenge to accomplish the task and constrain them as little as possible. The second is stress rapid decision making by those people closest to the problem qualified. Now, we often tell ourselves, well, the young people close to the problem aren't really qualified.

They don't see the big picture. They don't have the information and maturity. But I would say they know more than we think. And if we push information down to them and stress that they need to make rapid decisions, we'll find that our term on actions is much, much faster. And a decent decision now, in the military, is always considered to be a better decision than a great decision 48 hours from now.

Finally, I'd say accept mistakes and failure, if the organization and the individuals involved learn from it. If you don't have people willing to go out and try things because they're afraid of not accomplishing what they want the first time, you won't get mistakes, but you also won't get rapid behavior. You'll get very risk averse behavior. And so I'd push the organization by saying it's okay to fail as long as we get better with each failure. Next question, what is one thing you want average Americans, particularly anti war Americans, to understand regarding wars and conflicts you've been involved in or about the military in general?

From afar, situations in foreign wars look frustrating and difficult. Both our enemies and allies become two dimensional stereotypes. The enemy becomes this stereotypical bad guy, totally evil.

And our allies, sometimes, we can paint them too positively. But more often, recently, we paint them in frustrating colors. They just don't get it. They're not capable, or they don't care as much as we do. They're not courageous enough. They're not committed enough. Reality is far more complex. Our enemies often have a rational position. And it's very defensible. And, in many cases, if you put yourself on the other side of the table, you can see their position and, except for fate, you might be on that side. But our allies have a complexity as well. And they have a different viewpoint.

And that can be very different from ours. Just because we decide to ally with them doesn't mean they see the world entirely as we do. And in many cases, in a place like Afghanistan or Iraq, they have a different level of long term commitment. We may come and risk our national treasure, risk our lives. But they are going to live there forever. And as people used to talk about, local troops in Vietnam, they were not in a hurry to rush out and be killed because, if they wanted to get killed, they could get killed next week whenever they wanted because the war was there.

And they had to try to survive in the long term. I think what we really do, it doesn't mean we don't pursue our objectives, but it means we must possess the empathy to understand their positions, to see it from their view. Next question, what's something you see in military movies or movies involving the military that drives you crazy? Well, for me, the thing that is most frustrating is seeing the stereotypical bombastic military leader. In reality, there are some. And I've known some. I've served for some. But the average leader I see understands its soldiers are motivated by inspiration and confidence in their leaders not fear of punishment.

Next question, what filters can public use or what questions can they ask to sift through the noise of news to get a feel for the real truth behind the stories? Well, it goes to something that we don't do enough.

Try and get the perspective of the various players. We see the actors and the conflict, or in any case, and we want to assume that what we read in the paper is all there is, or see in the news is the depth of the story. But, in reality, whenever we're involved in one, we know it's not. You may not agree with someone else's position.

You may not know all they know. But the reality is there's typically a rational reason for how they think and how they act. There are occasional irrational players, but most of the time, people have a history that drives what they do. If we can get inside that, if we can begin to appreciate that, again, we may not completely agree with it.

But it would suddenly make a lot more sense to us. Next question, what \$100.00 or less purchase has most positively impact your life in the last 6 months? Clearly, it's a book. And the one that comes to mind is David Brookes' recent book, *The Road to Character*.

You can spend \$100.00 or less on a gadget or food or on something like that. But something that makes you think, something that makes you question your character, why it is the way it is, how it could be better is typically found in a book. And I think David Brookes made me think in his recent book. Next question, what's one of your favorite documentaries or movies, and why? Well, it sounds negative, but one of my favorite is a documentary. It's really a docudrama that was produced called the Battle of Algiers.

And I think it was made in 1966. And what it does is it tries to recreate the case of the French in Algeria, particularly as French paratroopers came in and tried to get control of the city of Algiers. And the thing that is great about it is 1) it's got a grainy, realistic feel. In fact, many of the players that played on the Algerian side, the front liberation national, or FLN, were actual participants in the actual movement.

But it also shows the complexity. It shows the difficulty of oversimplifying it. It shows the position of the French nationals who lived in Algeria and why they wanted to protect the status quo. It shows the position of the FLN or the Algerians who wanted independence. And it shows, also, the difficult position in the middle of the French military or paratroopers found themselves. It doesn't depict anybody as all good or all right. It shows a complex environment and just how difficult it can be. Final question, if you could put a billboard anywhere and write anything on it, one billboard, where would it be and what would it say?

I think it would be in a high traffic area, probably an airport, a city like New York, or maybe on a street in a busy city, New York or Chicago or San Francisco.

And it would have a simple quote from an individual named Robert Burn. And it would say, “The purpose of life is a life of purpose.” Thank you.