BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World by General Stanley McChrystal (US Army, retired), Tantum Collins, David Silverman and Chris Fussel

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General Stanley McChrystal *et al.*'s (2015) best-selling book *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* may seem like an unlikely book for review in *The Learning Organization* journal. The manuscript does not contain detailed theoretical references or complex conceptual designs common to prior book reviews articulately published in the journal. Nor does the author introduce the learning organization by name within the text. However, the real-life combat and business examples spawning the single conceptual model within General McChrystal's book provide an exceptional practitioner illustration of learning dynamics. Also, when viewing the book through the lens of learning organization practices set forth by others in the field of organizational learning, linkages with *The Learning Organization* journal become evident.

General McChrystal's description of how his leadership team restructured the Task Force from ground up based upon the principles of "shared consciousness" (extremely transparency of information sharing) and "empowered execution" (decentralizing decision-making authority) links with notions important to building a learning organization. Throughout the book, General McChrystal eloquently described how his team evaluated the behaviors of their smallest units, where success was evident, and extended those behaviors rooted in trust and joint purpose to a geographically dispersed organization of thousands. I contend that many of the examples within General McChrystal's book link directly with practices critically important to any organization trying to become a learning organization and compete in an inconstant world.

Although there were many learning organization definitions and descriptions, for the purpose of this book review I used Marsick *et al.*'s (2000) description of learning organization practices because these five elements are clear, concise and have foundations in culture, which was prevalent in McChrystal's book. Marsick offered the following:

- continuous learning at the system level;
- knowledge generation and sharing;
- systematic thinking capacity;
- greater participation; and
- culture and structure of rapid communication and learning as her description of a learning organization.

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Each of these five practices appeared throughout General McChrystal's description of actions taken in redesigning the Task Force, and next, I will describe each of the five with a brief linkage to General McChrystal's text.

Marsick described *continuous learning at the system level* as the need for people to learn and keep up with ever-changing environment at a holistic organization level. McChrystal recounted how "to achieve efficiency and predictability, armies have long dressed, drilled and disciplined men into becoming interchangeable parts of a military machine" (p. 35). Also, that early into the confrontation in Iraq, the Task Force uncovered that the "LIMFAC (limiting factor) lay not in the tactics or technology employed on the battlefield, rather the mundane art of management employed across the team" (p. 32). The authors realized, as stated in their words, "speed and interdependence had rendered our environment in Iraq incompatible with the vertical and horizontal stratification that had maintained military order for centuries" (p. 83). They lacked what they called resilient thinking – the ability to "roll with the punches" and learn and adapt quickly to an ever-changing environment. They entered Iraq using the archaic command and control systems set for bygone periods of consistency, interchangeability and scale.

To break free of cultural constraints, or archaic command and control structure, the team focused on *knowledge generation and sharing*, which Marsick *et al.* (2000) described as double-loop or generative learning that involves questioning assumptions behind work and structure. McChrystal explained how the culture of "disciplined, stratified reductionism" had deep roots in military organizational history, and he draws parallels in describing that the culture was not unique to the military (p. 52). As the authors outlined, the culture prevalent in the military originated with Frederick Taylor's scientific management and a focus on achieving highly efficient execution of a single solution that could be repeated to scale. As McChrystal and his team described, when they looked at the organization through the lens of a team structure, "searching for weaknesses in horizontal connectivity rather than for top down planning – choke points became visible between our individual teams" (p. 122). These choke points became known as "blinks" (p. 122). However, these blinks were simply sharing malfunctions where knowledge flows or sharing were interrupted or worse dropped. To eliminate the blinks and expand sharing to higher level organizations, the Task Force developed cross-organizational embedding and liaison employee programs. These exchange programs were created solely to develop strong lateral ties between teams. What they found was the employee transition created trust between the team members that led to expanded learning discussions. Simultaneously, daily meetings and information repositories were purposefully opened beyond the standard need-to-know format employed within the secret echelons of the military. Although this was an admittedly risky decision at the time, the rewards of knowledge expansion across the many teams greatly outweighed the need to maintain knowledge stratification within the command and control systems.

As the Task Force discovered, offering expansive knowledge sharing created a by-product through allowing everyone to see the bigger picture beyond the information previously held within the individual command structures. This opening of the organization resulted in greater *systemic thinking capacity*, which Marsick described as people thinking systematically about the impact of their decisions and work elsewhere in and on the system. As the system and holistic purpose became more evident, each individual within a smaller unit of command no longer viewed their piece of the war as the portion that really mattered most. As system thinking grew, what truly mattered most was success of the entire Task Force. As individuals no longer focused solely within their unit of command, specialization that was critically important under

Taylorism thinking degenerated. The focus on MECE (mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive) thinking and solutions dissolved under the weight of conflicting knowledge proving no one predictable solution. Also, with system thinking expanding across all levels, complexity and resilient thinking prevailed in development of adaptable solutions. The authors explained how they modeled their system thinking after George Mueller's work at NASA where "joint cognition" across the system underpinned success.

However, building an organization that understood the importance of learning, with open information, and system thinking was not alone the recipe for success. Employee involvement was noticed as critical to generating the knowledge. Marsick pointed to *greater participation by employees* as acutely important, as people must participate on work design, decision-making and learning for the organization to correctly progress. McChrystal described how "the connectivity of trust and purpose imbued teams with an ability to solve problems that could never be foreseen by a single manager" (p. 114). Also, with the engaged employees, the solutions often emerged from the bottom-up rather than top-down. McChrystal called for team proliferation that must span across many sectors and not be confined. However, some of the traits that made small work teams strong also made them difficult to scale. The Task Force focused on trust and purpose to break down the silos and join the teams. In addition, following the aforementioned example from Mueller, they emphasized "two cornerstones to shared consciousness – systemic understanding and strong lateral connectivity" (p. 187). As connectivity increased across teams (primarily a result of the earlier mentioned liaison program), more employees became involved outside the small team, which resulted in increased engagement and idea flow.

Culture and structure of rapid communication and learning was the last of Marsick's learning organization practices. The culture was described by Marsick as fortified by top-down rewards to support and promote. As recalled by General McChrystal, harnessing the capability of the entire geographically dispersed organization meant a culture of information sharing and transparency starting at the top. Also, he recounted how the daily operations and intelligence (O&I) briefs became the central "leadership tool in my arsenal" (p. 168). McChrystal emphasized how his team fixated on the O&I as "the most critical element of our transformation – the heart and muscle of the organism we sought to create and the pulse by which it would live or die" (p. 164). Herein they established the culture that stemmed from support and promotion of rapid (daily) sharing, learning and involvement. McChrystal explained how in 2003 he began to transition this daily, relatively small teleconference to a multi-national, interagency meeting spanning global participants. Additionally, as he expanded the meeting, he persisted to focus the discussion on expanding questions versus black-and-white answers, which kept the entire organization involved in expanded learning. As he described, "if an individual had a four-minute slot, and update portion would be covered in the first sixty seconds, and the remainder of the time would be filed with open-ended conversation" (p. 168). This engagement continued to support learning and promote additional discussions. As a result, "the responses to this type of interaction created new insights, deepened the group's understanding of a complex issue, and highlighted the deep levels of understanding" (p. 168). Learning expanded, as an outcome of the O&I structural changes in attendance and questioning structure led from the top members of the team.

General McChrystal summarized his book with the statement, "our transformation is reflective of the new generation of mental models we must adopt in order to make sense of the twenty-first century" (p. 251). The mental models described by General McChrystal

are strikingly similar to the practices of a learning organization and when viewed through Marsick's elements of a learning organization, it becomes more apparent that McChrystal's Task Force evolution may have been rooted in the development of a learning organization. Furthermore, for the readers of *The Learning Organization*, General McChrystal's Team of Teams presents an interesting practitioner's account of the evolution of learning organization practices in an environment full of constant change.

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References

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