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The Zero Dark Six Sigma Learning Organization Black Belt

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The Zero Dark Six Sigma Learning Organization Black Belt: What Should Businesses Learn From McChrystal and The Military Post 9/11?

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In a March 14 *Newsweek* article, “Zero Dark Inc.” (<http://mag.newsweek.com/2014/03/14/zero-dark-inc.html>), Katrina Brooker describes General (retired) Stanley McChrystal’s new company’s approach to helping businesses. In short his team combines the standard executive military boot-camp: early morning P.T. and team-building events, with McChrystal’s “power down” message. His message is that businesses must decentralize and trust in and listen to subordinates. His anecdotes mostly cover his JSOC experiences- and especially his experiences in Iraq. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), under McChrystal, is revered within many circles for becoming hyper efficient in its mission of hunting down and capturing or killing so-called “High-Value Targets”. Now businesses around America have gravitated towards McChrystal to give its executives the obligatory team-building experience, but now from the man of the hour himself: nothing is more impressive to many than McChrystal’s leadership of the unit during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

But what lessons should businesses take- if any- from the U.S. military’s handling of Iraq or even JSOC’s hunting of terrorists there and other places? And what of McChrystal’s record in Afghanistan- was he able to transfer the same impressive success he had in hunting targets in Iraq to the counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan? More importantly, was he able to reform the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the same manner he did JSOC, and, if not- why not? With a more critical approach to JSOC’s focus in Iraq and McChrystal’s record in Afghanistan, businesses can take away some important lessons, although they might not be the ones even the military is admitting to itself.

I assert that McChrystal’s focus in Iraq was very narrow and his unit itself lay outside of the bureaucratic norm in which all but the youngest businesses and few government entities exist. I further assert that he was unable to copy the same success he had in Iraq while in Afghanistan precisely because his command in Afghanistan was unable to focus and his mission was more like what most companies and government agencies face: it was very complex and faced multi-layered situations. If businesses want to take any lessons at all from McChrystal’s experiences it should be these: 1) decentralization, trust in subordinates, and listening *are* very important to any organization, 2) sometimes there are very good reasons one’s organization cannot do #1 to the extent possible to thwart competition or even avoid the organization’s demise, 3) complex situations sometimes require organizations (or their efforts) to “die” (or change direction), and, 4) not knowing when to switch direction or having an organization unwilling to entertain the idea of doing something different- often gets in the way of handling complex situations.

JSOC and Operation Iraqi Freedom

Both Katrina Brooker and General McChrystal tell basically the same story: in OIF the secret agencies and military units did not talk to each other (as is the norm) and terrorists many times got away from us. After 9/11 it took a while, but eventually things coalesced for JSOC as McChrystal took charge. Agencies started talking to each other and cooperating. Within JSOC, McChrystal ushered in a cultural change by decentralizing the command and listening to subordinates. As General McChrystal tells it, he started realizing he did not understand what was going on and thus had to rely on his people on the ground to tell him what was happening. Only by listening to them was he able to make progress. And make progress he and JSOC did. The numbers of targets killed in Iraq were very impressive, but what was more impressive was the short amount of time it took to find someone and “action” them and the corresponding coordination required to do so. Arguably the military and the secret agencies that coordinated with them during McChrystal’s tenure in Iraq have never come together like that before or since and thus it only makes sense that it was through the deft efforts of General McChrystal that made it happen.

The reality, however, may be a little more nuanced than the picture painted by the conventional wisdom. In truth, Iraq in 2006-2008 represented a situation wherein many fortuitous incidents came together. For one, the “surge” took place during this period of time. This increase of troops put a microscope onto the U.S. military’s efforts and there were huge political reasons to both focus on immediate success as well as prove- with metrics- that what we were doing was resulting in good things. Quite naturally this meant that whatever group could show an easy to understand increase in a positive data trend, the better for that group and its leaders. JSOC suddenly had a mandate and an opportunity- and a savvy leader would have known that his time was right. Utilizing a team effort, McChrystal was able to both shrewdly institute new working relationships and benefitted from a time in which the right people were either in the right jobs or were put there by the priority of the moment. I would argue that the people General McChrystal had working with him as well as those working forward for the other agencies and units he needed to cooperate with were the real key to JSOC’s success. In other words, Iraq during the time of the surge was THE place to be for those in the military hungry for action or advancement. If McChrystal had not had the best folks in key positions- and all with a mandate to make things happen- I argue he would not have had the same kind of success that he and JSOC did.

The more important issue, however, is what McChrystal’s actions actually led to. I liken it to a company focusing in on one quarter’s numbers- or even a few years’ numbers. Enron, for instance, had some very impressive years in which some of the “smartest guys in the room” did some really amazing things and some shareholders really made it rich. In the end, however, those smart guys ruined a company, devastated many workers and small investors, and hurt the country. Their focus on the short-term, metrics like earnings, and eventual disregard for decency and the law ruined things in the long run. McChrystal’s efforts as well as the entire U.S. military’s during the period of 2006-2008 were very impressive and by some have been painted as a “win” for the U.S. The surge is argued to have been a success. But what have we to show for it today? Is anything coming out of Iraq right now in the U.S.’s national interests? I assert that the U.S. military’s impressive short-term focus on killing or capturing notorious terrorists has at this time done very little for U.S. national interests and quite possibly did much damage. That being the case, maybe it would behoove us to take a look at Afghanistan and General McChrystal’s time there.

McChrystal in Afghanistan

General McChrystal, after a brief stint in the Pentagon as a staff officer, went from a 3-star General rank and command of a relatively small and elite fighting force with a very well-defined supporting mission in Iraq to a 4-star position in Afghanistan as commander of the entire effort: commanding general of the International Security Assistance Force, or, “ISAF”. This headquarters was (and still is) actually quite

difficult to comprehend. General McChrystal wore two hats: as a U.S. general he answered to US Central Command (USCENTCOM). Since ISAF is a NATO command he also answered to Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFC Brunssum) - the operational HQs of NATO. USCENTCOM was at that time commanded by General David Petraeus, the main figure behind the U.S. Army's Counterinsurgency (COIN) Manual (Field Manual 3-24) and at that time was seen as the heralded "savior" of the Iraq war effort which was largely considered to have been successful because of the insights found within FM 3-24. Although it was expected by many, there were also a significant number of officers within Afghanistan who were surprised McChrystal came in with such a positive attitude towards applying 3-24's concepts to Afghanistan, since in Iraq his unit had been focused on finding individuals and not counterinsurgency. Later, some officers in Afghanistan would opine that McChrystal was facing something he had never faced before: a COIN effort in a largely rural country, which was so unlike his mission in Iraq: a Counter-terror mission in mostly urban areas. Thus, they concluded, it was only rational that he would take his cues from his new boss and an allegedly tried and true new counterinsurgency doctrine.

JFC Brunssum was an entirely different entity than USCENTCOM. Even if one could call the JFC an operational headquarters, the reality of NATO meant that it was anything but a headquarters. Instead it was more like a clearing house for often confusing information requests, national caveat updates, and things resembling recommendations more than orders. Underneath ISAF were other NATO entities: The ISAF Joint Command, an operational headquarters that managed the daily "fight", and NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), a command that managed the training of Afghan police and army units and the equipping of those units through a subordinate U.S. entity called the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). CSTC-A, being a U.S. entity, answered both to ISAF and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan: the U.S. command in Afghanistan. As if this wasn't confusing enough, ISAF, along with the various partnered embassies, had to interact with President Karzai, the Government of Afghanistan, the U.S. Embassy, and the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior (to name just two). In short, General McChrystal did not have one boss, as he did in Iraq, and he did not have one clear and very urgent mission. In Afghanistan that was exactly the opposite of what he faced. And then there was the effort that was the counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan.

In early 2010 I briefed General McChrystal on NTM-A's plan for the next years' effort of training the Afghan police and army. It was a very doctrinally-correct plan: NTM-A's lines of effort consisted of the police, the army, the institutions, and the logistics behind the efforts. We had identified key objectives along our "lines"- most either referring to specific numbers we needed to reach in terms of troops and police or vague concepts like "capability to supply themselves without direct U.S. assistance". All of these lines pointed towards our end state: something along the lines of a 'stable Afghan Security Force that supports non-corrupt governance and is able to defeat insurgent forces without U.S. assistance'. He listened politely to me while I highlighted several of the more important key objectives we had identified and then he looked around the room and asked, "Guys, I know we're all working really hard, and I appreciate that. But I've been here before and I have heard basically the same stuff every time I've been here. I have to ask you, what are we doing differently?"

In the silence that followed, I felt as the lead briefer it was my responsibility to answer if no one else would. So I began, "Sir, we think the key at this point is that today we think we have a tool that will allow us more insight into why we are failing. In the past, we couldn't tell you why." I was hoping to then hand over the brief to our assessment team- who was in the middle of a fight between the Operations Research and Systems Analyst team- and who I felt had a great concept for how we could better figure out what we were doing wrong in terms of preparing Afghan security forces for the counterinsurgency fight. I was also hoping someone from our Force Management shop would step in and start talking about weaning the

Afghans off U.S. solutions. The generals in the room, however, interrupted at that point and “rescued” the briefing. They each took turns explaining to General McChrystal why this time everything was different. He listened to them all, very politely I thought, but then repeated himself: “I got it, I got it, but I still don’t think we’re really doing anything differently. That’s rhetorical at this point, you guys are doing great things, let’s move on.”

And we did keep on doing the same “great” things. We kept on training more police and soldiers and equipping them with our solutions. We kept on fighting the insurgency the way we thought we should, as opposed to how the Afghans thought they should. And the insurgency grew. During the ISAF campaign plan re-write General McChrystal was in Europe visiting NATO partners. The mood in the planning room to me seemed very dejected. It was the summer of 2010 and things did not look to be going very well. Politicians, it was rumored, wanted to break away from dealing with the Afghan police. The U.S. Embassy and ISAF did not seem to agree on anything from many different vantage points. The European Union Police Mission (EUPOL) and the other embassies agreed with ISAF on even less in my opinion. And the Afghan ministries and President Karzai were not even on the same planet as ISAF. Someone joked that General McChrystal was going to attempt the same thing Petraeus had in Iraq: show some positive metrics as fast as he could, declare victory, and then pull-out due to the lack of a Status of Forces Agreement. An hour later we found out General Petraeus was our new commander.

My point in sharing these anecdotes and this narrative is simply to attempt to describe the huge numbers of stakeholders, the ambiguousness of the mission, and the almost impossibility of any kind of coordination between all of the entities that McChrystal would have needed to have mimicked the same kind of success he had had in Iraq. The surge in Afghanistan was not the same surge as the one in Iraq had been. The surge in Iraq was accompanied with lots of political motivation and pressure. It came with a tailor-made new COIN manual. There were more troops in the Iraq surge, and to a country with less people and less area than Afghanistan. And certain groups of Iraqis were ready or already participating in actions of their own that would seem to dovetail with what the U.S. needed at that exact moment.

The surge in Afghanistan, however, was not met with the same level of focus or motivation- it was a different and divided administration effort. The troops available to come to Afghanistan in 2009 were not the same ones that were available to Iraq in 2006. And, perhaps most importantly, the conflict in Afghanistan was fundamentally different than the conflict in Iraq. What businesses should take from this, however, is not necessarily that there were two different situations faced by the U.S. in Iraq in 2006 and Afghanistan in 2009, but that the way the U.S. defined success in Iraq in 2006 was much different than the way the U.S. *could* define success in Afghanistan in 2009- and “... therein, as the Bard would tell us, lies the rub.” As Clive Owens’ character in *Inside Man* points out in an update to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the hard part is how one does something that seems to call for paradoxical or impossible deeds. In 2009 the U.S. was caught up in the Iraqi success model and unable to apply any other approach or a different way of measuring progress in Afghanistan.

What Businesses Should Learn from McChrystal’s Performances

First, businesses- and really all organizations- should take to heart McChrystal’s lessons from his time in Iraq. His efforts to flatten his organization, get everyone working with outside agencies towards a common cause, and both listen to and trust his subordinates are the hallmarks of a “learning organization” a la Peter Senge (minus the Systems Thinking and frame awareness pieces- and arguably frame awareness is perhaps the most important). Unfortunately for the U.S. military- and even U.S. Special Operations Command (not to mention the greater government) - this is usually impossible to accomplish. The environment within Iraq from 2006-2008 was special- there was a clear mission, almost complete political will behind the effort, a bevy of great personalities in the right positions that made it happen, and some

mostly unrelated (or at least only indirectly related) external events that coincided with the U.S.'s efforts (the Sunni Awakening, a relatively energetic and fresh U.S. military- compared to 2009, and political prioritization of the effort). The normal environment for most large, established, or governmental organizations is one in which there is no clear mission, stakeholder will is divided, and there is little motivation to suspend normal personnel processes and "surge" the right people to the priority of the moment. Thus, if a business is unable to create an environment that can overcome this norm- either through artificial means or the recognition of a real crisis, then instituting lasting systems that will result in flattening, trust, and coordination is very difficult, if not impossible, for all but the most young organizations and companies.

The second lesson is that short-term success has to be taken with a massive grain of salt. Killing and capturing terrorists in Iraq (and elsewhere) is sometimes, no doubt, necessary, and the capabilities required to do so effectively and efficiently are very impressive- not to mention very socially appealing to many as is evidenced by the latest movies, books, and video games depicting the activity. But, the long-term effectiveness of prioritizing that activity is very suspect- if Iraq or really any other country we have been conducting operations in is to be taken as an example. As many have opined recently, the best tactics in the world will still lose the war if the strategy is deficient. Likewise, in business if one relies on short-term and easily-measured metrics like quarterly sales, annual revenue, or stock price growth- one could find one's company out of business in short order. A business cannot miss the forest for the trees and has to constantly ensure that its purpose is both long-term focused and capable of being supported by all stakeholders in a very natural vice coerced manner.

The third lesson is that in some instances the best thing for everyone is for an effort- or even an entire business- to "die". Many organizations over time become little more than self-generating problems for many stakeholders. Unfortunately, within the government and certain monopoly situations, these organizations are very difficult to get rid of. Normally in a free market businesses that stop producing a long-term positive most likely collapse. Since this does always happen in all situations stakeholders have to at some point make a decision as to whether or not the organization in question is advancing the general interests of the stakeholders, assuming they have the power to do something about it. Dying may mean divesting of certain divisions, fundamentally changing direction, or simply selling out.

In Iraq the Iraqi government decided against offering a Status of Forces Agreement to the U.S. and thus precipitated our withdrawal. The U.S., luckily according to some, was able to declare victory and leave. In Afghanistan, however, this has not happened (yet). One has to wonder what Iraq would appear to be now if a SOFA had been agreed upon and U.S. troops had continued to stay there: if violence had increased it might have made the narrative much different. Not knowing when to stop efforts and go in another direction is perhaps the greatest lesson from Iraq. It is perhaps telling that today there are many organizations- and many more individuals- who count Operation Iraqi Freedom as a strategic U.S. victory. Maybe it is too early to tell, but surely it is not looking like a victory today. Whether our efforts of late in Iraq turn out to be a positive or not, the idea that a system set up to capture or kill terrorists very effectively and efficiently should be used as the basis for improving a business is very simplistic in my view. One has to understand why McChrystal was able to set up such a system in the first place. One also must understand one's own environment and even if one is lucky enough to be able to set up a system much like JSOC did in Iraq, one has to avoid the temptation to seize upon easily measurable and short-term metrics to gauge one's success.

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