On October 21, 1805, a British fleet led by the already legendary Horatio Nelson engaged a much larger Franco-Spanish fleet with the fate of England on the line. At the end of the day, Nelson’s fleet had routed the enemy in one of the most important naval battles in English history and secured English naval supremacy for the next 150 years.

Now for the rest of the story. Midway through the battle, a sniper shot and killed Horatio Nelson. Despite the loss of their charismatic and gifted leader, the British navy never faltered.

“Nelson’s real genius,” Stanley McChrystal notes, “lay not in the clever maneuver for which he is remembered, but in the years of innovative management and leadership that preceded it” (31). The management and leadership style of Horatio Nelson is at the heart of this exceptional book.

Stanley McChrystal is perhaps best known as the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq during the war against Al Qaeda. The lessons he learned during those years, as well as a study of management history, became the genesis of Team of Teams.

The challenges McChrystal faced were unlike those of earlier wars. He notes, “although lavishly resourced and exquisitely trained, we found ourselves losing to an enemy that, by traditional calculus, we should have dominated” (3). Al Qaeda’s unorthodox tactics helped them in killing hundreds of American soldiers and thousands of Iraqi citizens while plunging the entire country into chaos. This was the challenge General McChrystal and his leadership team were asked to address.

He quickly discovered that changing the way organizations do what they do can be remarkably difficult, especially when there is a long history of doing things a certain way. McChrystal observes that making necessary and timely changes in practice is not only a problem for the military, but can be equally challenging for all kinds of organizations. Such change is even more difficult because we live in an era of what he calls “unpredictable complexity,” a reality he thoughtfully contrasts to the complicated, but predictable, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Think of it this way. A washing machine is a complicated piece of equipment. With a schematic in hand, however, many people can make necessary repairs. Imagine doing so if the design of the machine changed on a daily basis—you’d soon be pulling your hair out! This is exactly what General McChrystal and his team faced in their battle against Al Qaeda: constantly shifting tactics unlike anything the U.S. Army had ever faced.

I suspect you can sympathize with McChrystal. While you may not be facing an enemy fanatically committed to your death, you are leading during one of the most significant transitional eras in the history of mankind—and the speed of change is not going to slow anytime soon. McChrystal comments, “Fifty years ago a Fortune
500 company was expected to last around seventy-five years. Today the life expectancy is less than fifteen years and is constantly declining. The Fortune 500 list of 2011 featured only sixty-seven companies that appeared on the list in 1955” (73). It is this reality that makes Team of Teams a valuable read.

To put this in very personal terms, compare a list of ACSI member schools circa 2000 with the list today. Then take a look at comparable enrollment numbers. The percentage of dropouts is not yet equal to that of Fortune 500 companies, but it is still cause for alarm. As McChrystal notes, “[The United States military] were an outstanding twentieth-century organization, but that was of little use in the twenty-first century” (32).

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What makes this book so valuable, however, is that McChrystal does more than just identify a problem; he also provides clear direction on how to respond. His method runs counter to the “command and control” concepts popularized in the late nineteenth century by Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management.

Frederick Taylor “has probably had a greater effect on the private and public lives of the men and women of the twentieth century than any other single individual” (48). If you think that to be a bit of hyperbole, take a look at your school’s organizational chart and compare it the org chart on page 47 of Team of Teams. I suspect they will be nearly identical. Given the massive changes in our world today, perhaps it is time to consider an alternative. This is McChrystal’s central argument in Team of Teams.

Under Taylor’s model, we tend to think of leaders as having nearly supernatural powers. We expect them to possess a limitless capacity for acquiring knowledge relevant to their profession and an equally limitless capacity for making the right decision. That has always been a fantasy. In the world we now inhabit, it has become a dangerous one. As McChrystal notes, “Where once an educated person might have assumed she was at least conversant with the relevant knowledge on a particular field of study, the explosion of information has rendered that assumption laughable” (223).

In place of the “leader as chess master” perspective, McChrystal argues that it is time to adopt a different metaphor: the leader as gardener. This metaphor requires a very different way of thinking about leadership. It forced McChrystal himself to shift his focus “from moving pieces on the board to shaping the ecosystem” of his organization, from making all of the decisions to “creating and maintaining the teamwork conditions we needed.” “Tending the garden” became his primary responsibility because “only the senior leader could drive the operating rhythm, transparency, and cross-functional cooperation we needed. I could shape the culture” (226). This description of leadership is compellingly compatible with what I read in the New Testament.

Team of Teams is a book that will challenge many of your basic assumptions about organizational leadership and decision making. It is also a book that just might help you, and the school you lead, to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century.

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