

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 245: GENERAL STANLEY MCCHRYSTAL

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. Sometimes the business landscape can look like a battlefield. We are constantly navigating risky situations, trying to outsmart competitors, and even combatting contentious colleagues on our own team. But our guest today puts all of this small stuff into perspective. General Stanley McChrystal is a highly decorated U.S. Army veteran who is no stranger to real battlefields. He's a retired four-star general and commanded an enormous contingent of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. He's also an avid student of history who acutely observes how the great successes and failures of the past are so deeply intertwined with risk management. His latest book is called *Risk: A User's Guide*. What lessons could we possibly apply from war zones and global conflicts to our own professional development? Well, a whole lot. As you'll hear from my fascinating conversation with General McChrystal, I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I did. Well, we are delighted to have you, and where I would like to start is one or two formative experiences for you in your life.

General Stanley McChrystal: When I was young, my father was a soldier, and so I think the most formative experience was probably when I was 10 years old, my father was giving orders to Vietnam, and he wanted to go to Vietnam. Obviously, as a professional soldier, he fought in Korea, but we put the family in a family station wagon. There were six kids at the time, the youngest being still a baby, and we drove from where we lived in Virginia, down to Lookout Mountain Tennessee, Chattanooga, where my mother was from. And we were going to stop and stay with her family for a day or two and then go down to Fort Benning, Georgia, where my father would do a preparatory course before going. And the thing that I remember most is that the trip, as most family vacations are, was a fiasco. My mother got appendicitis at the end of day one, and when we arrived in to Chattanooga, she had to be rushed to the hospital for that. The kids were then split among a bunch of different relatives who we didn't really know, and I was put at one of my aunt's homes and. About I don't know. I remember it as midnight, but I was terrified my father was leaving and I was so close to my father and I admired him so much that I got out of my aunt's house not knowing my way around Lookout Mountain at all, and just went out and went to go find my father. So I'm

walking the streets of Lookout Mountain Tennessee, and I finally get picked up by a policeman, and the policeman kindly takes me to my grandmother's house where my father was staying away. My mother was in the thing, and I remember to this day because I was desperate to see my father desperate to be connected with him before he left. And it just reminded me, you know, we joke about it in my family, but it reminds me about what was what is the most important thing.

Whitney Johnson: That's a wonderful experience that you had with your dad. Is there anything that comes to mind for you that you've had with your own son?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yes. My son was the son of an army officer, so I was busy all my career and probably wasn't as good a father as I should have been, but I departed for Afghanistan right before he graduated from high school. And I was then going, I came back for a period, but then left again for five years, so I essentially was gone through the end of his high school and through all of his college years, and I started over that time to feel. We always had a good relationship, but very distant from him, and that he was I was living a completely different life and I was worried and he was a rock musician at the time. He was into punk rock and all, and I was happy for him. But but I felt this sense that we are just being pulled further and further apart. And I needed to have a connection. So when I would come back, we would try to get down to where he was. He was down in Tallahassee, Florida, because it just everybody says absence makes the heart grow fonder. I actually think absence and distance pull you apart. And you've got to be very intentional about trying to keep that alive.

Whitney Johnson: I love that image that you have of going after your father and making sure you had that tether. And how how powerful that was for you and then this experience that you just shared about your son to making sure that that tether was in place down in Tallahassee. Got a little alliteration there. Thank you for sharing those stories. In our work. We talk a lot about the S-Curve of Learning how you start at the launch point. You're grasping for knowledge to figure out what it is you're doing in order to accelerate. And then at some point you move into the sweet spot, this steep back of the S and you feel like your neurons are firing. You know exactly what you're doing. And I'm wondering, do you remember a point in your career where you looked around and you said, This is it, this is my purpose. I'm in the sweet spot. I this is where I'm supposed to be.

General Stanley McChrystal: Absolutely. You know, I went to West Point at age 17, and they spend four years teaching you to be both a college graduate and an army officer, but you come out not really ready to be an army officer, so you go into the profession with a few skills and you start to build them. So my lieutenant years began in 1976 when I had graduated from West Point. And so for about the first six or seven years, I was described myself as a journeyman. I was trying to become technically and tactically proficient in my job, learn how to interact with people. I was a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division with paratroopers, and then I was a team leader in special forces and a team leader. Then I went to Korea for a year and I was an operations officer, but I came back and I was assigned to a mechanized infantry unit and I was made a company commander. And it was during this period I commanded for just slightly less than two years. It was during this period when I suddenly realized first I could do this job.

General Stanley McChrystal: I am proficient. I am good enough. I could look around at my peers and I said, I can be as good as my peers, and then I could look up at my battalion commander, who was a few years senior and commanding a larger unit, and I said I could be him. I could learn what I don't know now. And I suddenly felt like I was starting to accelerate into that where I was credible in the level I was and I realized what I had to learn to get to. I wanted and I thought I had all the tools. And I tell you the downside to that was at a certain point, you start thinking, Yeah, I've got this figured out, you know, get out of my way. And so I went through another period later in my career when I realized maybe I didn't know everything, you know the big shock. But I had that period in my career, probably from about the ninth, 8th or 9th year of my career, up to about 16th or 17th when I felt just here we go.

Whitney Johnson: So that place of optimized tension where you felt like you knew enough, the possibility was there, but you weren't so, so cocky of like, I know everything, but you just this place of enough, but not too much.

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, very comfortable. And I really enjoyed those years.

Whitney Johnson: You've written several books, but your latest book is on risk and you talk about how it is unavoidable and we shouldn't focus on dodging it, but instead shore up those systems to be able to deal with the repercussions. And you said that it's a lot like a human immune system. Tell us about that, what the conclusion was and how you had the idea to even think about this in the first place.

General Stanley McChrystal: Absolutely. Well, first I wanted to write about risk because I'd spent a lifetime dealing with it and concluded I didn't really know it that well and that the organizations I was a part of. So we decided to study it. And our first conclusion was. The greatest risk to us is actually us. It's not these external threats, and we came to the to the.

Whitney Johnson: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Sorry, we got to stop there. That is too good. You just said that it was like, mic drop. Ok. The greatest risk to us is us. Say a little bit more about that because that superpower?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, absolutely. And thanks and. You know, they did a survey some years ago with CEOs of major companies and they said, what are the risks you worry about? And they list all these risks. And they were all external risks, changes in the market competition, et cetera. And then they looked at a list of companies that had failed, and every one of them had failed for internal reasons. And so we are hardwired to look what's over the next hill, around the corner in the dark, and we try to prepare and predict that we're no good at that. And yet the things which we have control over. Our ability to make ourselves and our organizations more resilient, more powerful. Most of them lay within our control. We can do that and we've just got to identify what they are and do that.

Whitney Johnson: Do you remember when you had that big realization because it's so fascinating, right? We try to control it things we can't and we don't want to control because it's really hard to control the things that we can. Was there a moment in your career, I keep on asking you for these moments, but when that aha hit you?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, I was commanding. It was a little bit later I was commanding. The counterterrorist forces in the United States called J-SOC, Joint Special Operations Command, and we had we were the best counterterrorist force ever fielded in the world and incredibly elite organizations and people inside and whatnot. And we ran into a problem we'd never face before an organization called Al Qaida in Iraq, and it was a later version of Iraq that emerged in two thousand three and it was bigger, more dangerous, more lethal. It just had very different characteristics in it than we'd seen before. And so we went into this focus to try to figure them out. Hmm. What? What makes them tick? Why do they operate boom? And in that process, I realized the big problem was how we operated. We had formed this organization that was purpose built to solve a problem that had now changed. And so inside our organization, we were comfortable, almost arrogant in our capabilities. But the problem was becoming us. And first off, we didn't really understand ourselves, and 2: those changes we needed to make were internal. So 80% of the problem was us, and only 20 percent was the enemy. So the question is, how do you defend yourself? And then when I talk about yourself, let's start with the human body. About ten thousand times a day, your body ingests a microorganism that could make you sick or kill you about ten thousand times a day is the estimate. And yet we don't get up in the morning worried about our human immune system. We don't wonder whether this miracle in our body is going to detect those threats.

General Stanley McChrystal: Assess each one for whether it's dangerous to us. Respond to it destroyed as necessary and learn from it. It just does. And we are alive because it does that and we take it for granted in many cases, unless we suffer something that causes us to lose that immunity to be weakened in some way. I had come back from Afghanistan in 2010 and I started teaching at Yale University, and the last thing I had done was to work on counterinsurgency, how to prevent, in that case, the nation of Afghanistan to try to fight off the insurgents that we're trying to overthrow and ultimately did overthrow the government. And we'd come to the conclusion that the problem was not the insurgents. They were not 10 feet tall. They weren't particularly popular. They weren't all that effective. The problem was Afghanistan's government and all of the things that weakened their society. It was corruption. It was poor governance. It was lack of talent. It was all these things, and I was just doing my analysis sort of in the rear view mirror. And a young Yale immunologist named Christina Talbot Schlegel came to see me in my office at Yale, and I didn't know her from Adam. And she says, I am an immunologist. I focus on the human immune system, and I think it's very much like counterinsurgency. And I said, huh, because I didn't know anything about the human immune system, and I said, Well, all right. And she had focused on HIV aids. And so she took

me through this tutorial on how HIV doesn't kill anybody. It weakens your immune system and then you are killed by something that your body would normally fight off.

General Stanley McChrystal: And I said, that's what happened in Afghanistan. That's exactly the problem. And she says, that's right. And so we put together this project, which turned out to be a briefing, and we went out and briefed it a bunch of places. And it was very interesting to people. But it really resonated with me that the key is if your immune system is healthy, if a nation's immune system is healthy, if a human's, then you are able to fend off all of these threats that come fast forward a bit as we're going and we're starting to talk about risk. It just jumped out at me that all of this external risk came at us and we're not very good at avoiding them or predicting them. So it's a fool's errand to try. But what we have to have is the ability to detect them, assess them, which ones we should worry about, respond to them and in appropriate ways, and then learn from it. And so it occurs to me that organizations have the same requirement for a risk immune system. And it's interesting because you don't need a specific risk immune system for every different kind of risk because most of the response requirement is the same for any threat that comes. There are some specific things that you change in your response and whatnot, but the reality is, if you're good at dealing with threats that come, you're good at dealing with threats. So it's like making your organization healthier or we call it risk fit, right?

Whitney Johnson: A really strong immune system, right? So I love it when people call me, ma'am, that's awesome. Ok, so you talk about these various and actually wasn't being facetious. I was being serious. It's so polite. You talk about a number of risk control factors, and I'm going to assume that these and we don't have time to go through all of them. And in fact, we're not going to because everybody, you need to buy the book. But there are a few. And so maybe there's let's talk about vitamin C to strengthen your immune system for communication, vitamin D to strengthen your system and vitamin T. So communication, diversity and technology. So a few of those risk control factors, can you talk us through those?

General Stanley McChrystal: There are 10, but I think maybe the most important is communication, because if an organization can't communicate, it can't coordinate. It can't respond. It can't do things. But communication, we say, OK, we'll just communicate. Whoa, it's not that easy. There are four tests that we lay out for communication, and the first one is, can you physically communicate? Do you have the ability to get the information from here to there? You know, that's telephones, computers, different things. The second And, assuming you have a yes, you have that capability. The second is, will you do it? That's very different. Will people communicate? Will they share the information they have? Will they talk to that person they don't know or don't like? There are all kinds of barriers and we find in organizations and bureaucracies tremendous resistance on the will side. In the counterterrorist fight, we found that the CIA and J, different, wouldn't we had to get over that hump even if people can communicate and they will, you got two more tests. The first is what's the quality of the information? Is it accurate? Is it relevant? Is it something that is going to be of some value to people? And is it still viable at the time? And then the final is the ability of the recipient to actually digest it. You know, if it comes to you in a foreign language, you don't speak or it comes to you in text speak and you don't understand the language or for some reason you are unable or unwilling to spend time on it.

General Stanley McChrystal: Just one of those things, if it's a no and you're not communicating. And so organizations have extraordinary challenges in maintaining. And then I'll throw one other part into this, and that is misinformation, because now we're in an age when technologically it's easier to communicate than ever, but it's also easier to communicate flawed information. And in the book, we use Adolf Hitler and his ability to leverage that to hit propaganda. But in a more nuanced way, we describe the American Tobacco Institute and what they did in the 1950s is it was brilliant. They didn't take on the argument that cigarettes cause cancer because that was starting to be proven pretty clearly. All they did was they said, Yeah, this is a problem. Cigarettes may cause cancer and we're going to study it more. And as soon as we know for sure, we'll tell you. And the implication was until then, it's OK to smoke. Hmm. And it worked for about 70 years. And if you think about it to a degree, it's still working, and so the danger of misinformation or intentional disinformation is just huge and we need to factor that in our understanding of it.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So let me make sure I heard it understood. So communication, vitamin C, I know you don't say that, but it's helping me remember it and it keeps your immune system strong is there are four factors to it number one can you communicate? Do you have the ability to do it? Number two, huge is. Will you communicate?

Three is what is being communicated and there's definitely challenges with misinformation. And then four is, will you receive it? And as you said that I thought that was really interesting because you mentioned this idea of can you understand it from a foreign language perspective, is it tech versus the patois of marketing? But I think there's also the big piece of the emotional aspect of will you receive it? Someone has just given you information that disagrees with your worldview. Are you emotionally do you have the emotional capacity and wherewithal to hear what you just said to me? Will I hear it? And to me, that's huge. And what I think I'm hearing you say is if you can get communication right, that lowers all of the other risk factors. Is that accurate?

General Stanley McChrystal: Absolutely. It enables the other risk factors to be much, much stronger. I would argue if communication is completely broken, you're probably dead in the water. The better you can get communication, the more likely all of the others can be kept to a higher level.

Whitney Johnson: So necessary, but not sufficient. Yeah. Yeah, OK. Can you touch on the other two just very quickly before we move on to the technology factor and the diversity factor?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, technology is basically telling us that we have a relationship with technology we don't completely understand and we certainly don't master. We tell a story about 1983, there was a Soviet missile defense organization, Operation Center, and they got a computer warning that five missiles had launched from the United States against the Soviet Union. And the normal procedure is to pass that warning up to the higher headquarters at Moscow, where they'd make a decision on a counterstrike. There was a Lieutenant Colonel Petrov in the command center and as this alert comes, his procedure is to pass it, but he doesn't. And for about 20 minutes, he refuses to pass it forward, even though it's his duty. Instead, his intuition tells him there's something wrong that the computer is giving a false read and people. They describe the moment everyone in the ops center is watching him go and what? What in the world? And it turns out, of course. And he's done some, some logic behind it. It was only five missiles and whatnot. He probably prevented nuclear war. Oh, and he got no reward for it. In fact, he got, he got criticized for not taking good notes during the operation. But that shows that they had built a system that was dependent upon technology. And yet in the critical moment, it required a human to override it. And I would argue that we often don't know the impact of technology, how many times have you called a company and you want customer service and they got those automated systems dial one. And after a while, you get so mad, you hang up and you say, I'm going to another firm. They don't know that they just lost a customer. What they know is they save money because that system is cheaper than people. And so often the unintended impacts of technology change the way our organizations work and increase our risk to various outside threats.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And you know, before you go to the diversity piece because I think this is a really lovely lead-in. When you talked about Lieutenant Colonel Petrov, that was very moving for me to hear that because it took a tremendous amount of courage and. And so I just want I just want to take a moment and acknowledge that is that was very powerful. So thank you for sharing that which goes to diversity, a diversity of opinion, seeing things differently. Talk about that briefly, how that lowers your risk across an organization.

General Stanley McChrystal: Diversity is absolutely essential, but I think we often confuse it. We think that diversity is having people of different genders, different races, different ages in the room, and we say we've solved the diversity problem. I would argue, no, I would argue that is equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity is a legal right and it's a moral right and we should pursue it. But it isn't diversity. Diversity is different perspectives and experiences. Diversity is getting into the room when critical decisions are going to be made, people who will come at it from a different angle. In the book, we use the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, where President Kennedy brings together a bunch of advisors and they make a terrible decision to launch an operation that was poorly planned and not very well conceived in the aftermath of that. A doctor studied it, a guy named Irving Janis, and he coined the term groupthink. And he said groups can make very incorrect decisions and they can all sort of sign on because a number of dynamics sign up. Diversity allows people with different perspectives to say, Wait a minute, I see this from a different angle. And so what we found is organizations that actually have and used diversity are more competitive, more successful. It's got nothing to do with what makes people feel good because you you check the equality box

Whitney Johnson: For our listeners who are familiar with the S curve. This is a great example of diversity, where you've got people who are at the launch point of their S-curve and seeing things from a very different perspective than someone who's in the sweet spot of their learning and someone who's in mastery along the curve. And so that's

another to your point of perspective. When you're in the valley versus the mountain, you've got a very different perspective and that goes to that that piece on diversity. So I'm wondering, you know, government of Afghanistan collapses within weeks of the U.S. leaving, and I'm just wondering, are there? What risk factors do you think maybe we didn't see? I just would love to hear, you know, sort of you analyze that situation through the lens of the risk factors that you're thinking about to the extent that you can. And it's not confidential, obviously.

General Stanley McChrystal: Sure. When the government of Afghanistan collapsed, it essentially imploded. What happened was the government, the military forces and much of the population made a calculation that a Taliban takeover was inevitable. And as soon as they made that calculation hit that tipping point, there was no point in fighting because there was no point in dying. Why do you want to be the person who who dies in something that is going to inevitably happen anyway? And they've had enough history to understand there's there's no prize for dying on something that doesn't work. Yeah. And that had come over a number of years. So what I would argue is over the course of our involvement there, the Afghans began with inflated hopes and expectations of what would come out after nine eleven. They were disappointed. And then the Taliban did a really masterful job of weaving a narrative that says eventually the Americans will leave. Eventually, we will be in charge and they over time, they got people to accept that more and more and the United States sort of unwittingly played into that because routinely we would say, yeah, we're going to pull out. Over the course of 10 years, we kept kind of signaling we're going to pull out as soon as we can. And so as soon as the final decision was made, really the signing of the Doha Accords, the Afghan people became incredibly insecure. And then when President Biden set the final date to follow through with that, I think it just took the air out of the balloon. The Afghans are not cowards. I've seen them fight fought alongside them, but they just made a calculation that it wasn't going to work, and I think they were wrong, I think that was tragic. But that's what I think happened.

Whitney Johnson: It's interesting. It goes back to one of the risk factors that you didn't we didn't talk about here, but is in your book about the narrative risk factor and controlling that narrative and what what was the narrative within Afghanistan and what was the narrative within the United States, et cetera? That's very interesting. Let's talk about you for a minute. Not that we're not already talking about you, but as you look at the risk factors or risk control factors, is there one that's especially challenging for you? You said at the outset you wanted to write about risk because you feel like you want to understand it better. Do you look at any of these factors and go, Oh, this is so important, but I work hard. I have to work really hard on this particular factor.

General Stanley McChrystal: They all at times were a challenge, but I'm going to call out bias. Hmm. And you say bias we typically think will bias he must be a racist or something like that. And the answer is bias is the fog on the lens of your glasses. So you see things a certain way. And I'm a sixty-seven-year-old former soldier. I've had a set of life experiences and I have a set of views based upon that life journey. I used to get across the table from leaders in Afghanistan with turbans, and they were Pashtun leaders with a very different life journey and they had a different perspective than I did. They were biased like I was, but I had to admit I was biased as well. I'm in McChrystal Group and we're a team and we've got people from every age. And this morning one of our younger people was talking about a person in another firm who had said, I'm going to take twenty-four hours off to go help my wife have a baby, and then I'll be right back on the project. And he was very upset about that, and he said, How can anybody prioritize so poorly? They don't totally focus family, and I'm sitting inside thinking when my wife went into labor, I dropped her at the hospital and went to work. And I'm sort of feeling self-righteous about what I did. And that's my bias. I mean, that's me. I am right. I'm a prisoner of my experience. And so the challenge for me is always to stop and go. All right. That's my experience. That's my bias. It doesn't make something else, right? But it doesn't make me right, either.

Whitney Johnson: Mm hmm. Good lesson for all of us. Can you talk about emotional regulation? I'm thinking about, OK, so what are some things that we can do to address these blind spots and my my head is going to and you can totally divert your answer to this question if you want. But I'm wondering about emotional regulation because I think this is something that we in society are really struggling with in terms of being able to manage through stress, which is very, very high. And I have to believe that as a soldier who is functioning as a human being today, you learned how to do that. And so I'd love for you just to talk briefly about that and possibly one or two suggestions for people of like, well, here's what it looks like. Here's what I did and what what would you suggest?

General Stanley McChrystal: It's rooted in self-discipline. The first thing you find in moments of crisis, whether it's combat or not, is your decision making effectiveness is not going to go up if you are more emotional, if you yell louder, if you throw things, if you do those things, it doesn't improve your decisions. In fact, I would argue it takes away from them. Mm hmm. Because you get distracted. Even more importantly, it has a huge effect on the people around you. A negative effect if people in a military context see their sergeant or their officer getting very emotional, showing fear anything, it is contagious. The young people will go, OK, that's what I'm supposed to do, and they will do the same. And so the first thing you have to do is control your emotions so that you can make good decisions, but also so you have a good effect on people. I think that in today's society, it almost takes hyperbole to be heard. If you go out in front of the public, you can't just say, Yeah, we have a little problem in this. You have to scream. It is the sky's falling in or people won't listen. Your message won't make it. Mm hmm. And what that does is it amps up the emotion in everything. And it raises the stakes and people start arguing about the emotion. You know, I tell people that nations go to war for four interests, but once you've killed each other side, you're fighting a lot for emotion. And as long as that goes, the forest fire can keep burning, and so you're really going to try to control it.

Whitney Johnson: So what do you do to manage your emotions? Is there? Do you breathe like what? Like something super practical? What do you do or is it so instinctive that you don't pay attention to it at this point?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, I think the first thing is you have to step back and say, OK, what is the situation? It just requires you to go, OK, what am I about to respond to? What decision or decisions do I have to make and what is my role in this thing? And if you do it almost out of body experience immediately and say, How am I going to be value add that can be very helpful. The same thing will happen with somebody insults me or does something that I would very much like to respond to emotionally. And getting old helps, but the biggest thing is to step back and say, OK, what am I going to get out of that? Let me go. Three moves down. I had a guy yesterday. Write me a really hateful email. And my first response is to write him a hateful email back. And I said, What is that going to do? Not going to change him. And it's just going to drag me into it. So I've learned just don't hit send. Don't run my mouth. Step back just a little bit and think, OK, what do I really want out of this particular interaction?

Whitney Johnson: So you go to the top of the mountain and sort of look at it from a zoom out perspective, and that also allows you to look forward and say, Who do I want to be in this moment and play that out? Ok, that's fantastic. Do you have any other tips in terms of for those of us, whether in the military or professionally, to address risk blind spots? Is there one simple mindset shift that you would encourage people to consider today?

General Stanley McChrystal: Pressure test And what I mean by that is we like to be ignorant because if you're ignorant of something, you don't have to do anything about it. And if you pressure test you find out that there's all kinds of issues you should address. But the responsible thing to do the best thing for you and your organization is to pressure test a lot. And that's uncomfortable. It requires you to look at certain things to do certain exercises at whatever, but do them a lot because in the moment of a crisis, you're going to be pressure tested. Yeah, and you don't want to find the holes then.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, you want to know when you just said that what it made me think of. So you know, you do coaching, we do coaching and you know, we do 360s and stakeholder feedback and all those things. And yesterday I was thinking, you know, I haven't had a 360 on me for a while probably would be a good idea. So that goes to this idea of pressure testing, right? If you're out there teaching, have perspective, step back. Look, three steps ahead. Are people saying that you're doing that in that moment? So great. I love it. Ok? We obviously can learn a lot from failures, but there's something that we can learn from success stories as well. Can you share an example of a company or a country or a person who came, overcame tremendous something and an extraordinary challenge thanks to their being prepared around risk?

General Stanley McChrystal: Yeah, I think I would use Marty Walsh, the mayor of Boston, for COVID 19. And it's a combination of being prepared, but also being humble enough to open his mind. And what happened is at the beginning of COVID 19, he didn't know whether it was a real problem. And he goes to visit a friend of his and the friend won't shake hands and he goes, No, wait a minute. And this is a guy that they always interact and he takes that as a signal. I should pay attention. Something is happening here that I, as a politician, don't fully understand. So we started gathering information, and he came to the conclusion that he was going to have to act more decisively, leading the city of Boston than anything he'd ever done. And that was going to put him at risk because he was going

to make decisions like canceling the Boston Marathon, which is very unpopular. The St. Patrick's Day parade in South Boston. I mean, he was going to do things that many people in the population weren't going to agree were necessary, but he had to do them to do what he thought was his job. So I think he did some smart things. When he was humble about it, he gathered information from people who knew more than he did. He went back on successes he'd had before in previous crises like the 2015 big snowfall, where for 10 consecutive weeks that the city had been pounded by snow and he'd made hard decisions about schools and transportation. He went back on that and then he said, And I've got to connect, go back to communication, vitamin C, as you call it. I've got to connect stakeholders in Boston like never before, not just my government. I got to connect every entity that's touched by what we're about to do. And we got to get them involved. And we're not going to do a vote on what we need to do, but we're going to be informed and make good decisions, and he had a really good outcome because of that.

Whitney Johnson: What was one of the really positive outcomes that came about because he was willing to. He was prepared. Risk fit, as you describe it.

General Stanley McChrystal: One of the biggest things he was worried about was the at-risk population in the city. When we say at risk, it's often homeless, but it's also people on fixed incomes who need the delivery of food, and in many cases, it now had to be home delivery. And so the ability to leverage existing resources to take care of those people who wouldn't necessarily rise above everybody's consciousness level but would suffer disproportionately. He was able to focus on them with tremendous success.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, those able to protect people beautiful. What was useful to you in this conversation?

General Stanley McChrystal: Very much what you do is you put things in a very human or personal context. So when you talk about something on the S-Curve and you talk about suddenly reaching a point where you are able to see great success and all to remind us that that's a very personal journey and that moment is not scripted out. It is something that we hopefully discern in the moment. But we sometimes need a little help on that. And so that's one of the things that that jumped out at me.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. Disrupt Yourself because the enemy is us, is what you would say, right?

General Stanley McChrystal: That's right.

Whitney Johnson: And any final thoughts?

General Stanley McChrystal: No, I very much appreciate the time. Fascinating.

Whitney Johnson: Oh well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Four key takeaways from our conversation. Number one, the biggest risks are internal. As General McChrystal explained, We are hardwired to look out for external threats lurking in the shadows. But if you look at a list of companies and organizations that failed, you'll often find that internal problems brought them down. Anticipating external risk is a fool's errand, as the general says. Instead, focus on addressing what you can control as in Disrupt Yourself.

Number two. Communication. I thought it was fascinating how he said this is the most important risk control factor, can you communicate, will you communicate, and importantly, will you receive communication from others? Communication really does go both ways. If you want to lower risk in your business and in your life, follow his four-part framework.

Number three, step back in order to grow. Yes, growth accelerant number five. That's what you do when you encounter risk. You step back. You don't send that email. You don't say that thing. You were going to say you zoom out. You assess. You wonder what could be true for this person that they are behaving this way. But more importantly, what do I want to be true about myself in the future? This is emotional regulation. This lowers risk.

Number four. Everyone has biases. I love how General McChrystal broke down this word. We tend to think about bias as a problem in organizations that must be rooted out, but everyone has fog on their glasses, as he put it.

Yes, we want to bring in people of all backgrounds to the table, but true diversity is about having different perspectives in the room at all times. It's the antidote to groupthink, which gets a lot of companies and countries into trouble. Acknowledge that, as General McChrystal said, I am a prisoner of my own experience and seek the perspective of others constantly. If you want more on communication, go back and listen to Buster Benson Episode 174. He's a former product manager at Slack and Twitter. And if you want something on miscommunication, listen to Paul Hill, former director of mission operations at NASA. Episode 105. If you would like a copy of General McChrystal's book, email me at W.J. at Whitney Johnson and share with me a reflection from this conversation. We will make five books available. I read and respond to every note.

And if you are ready to get smarter about your growth. Our new book, Smart Growth How to Grow Your People to Grow Your Company is now available for preorder wherever books are sold. We'll include a link in the show notes. Thank you again to General Stanley McChrystal for being our guest. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer. Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor, Whitney Job assistant producer Steve Ludwig and production assistant Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.