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The war on the coronavirus

Three top military leaders offer lessons from the front lines of managing deadly crises.

The challenge of navigating a vast public-health and -economic crisis shares some important parallels with leadership during military conflicts. In this episode of the *Inside the Strategy Room* podcast, McKinsey senior partner Yuval Atsmon talks with three top US Air Force and Navy leaders about what corporate executives can learn from the practices of military commanders. Michael B. Donley served as the 22nd secretary of the US Air Force. He has 30 years of experience in the national security community, including service on the staffs of the United States Senate, White House, and Pentagon. C. Robert Kehler is a retired US Air Force general who served as commander of the US Strategic Command and of Air Force Space Command, among other positions. Eric Olson is a retired US Navy admiral who headed the US Special Operations Command. He is also the first Navy SEAL to be appointed to three-star and four-star flag rank. Yuval Atsmon—himself a former tank commander—is a coauthor of the recent article "Lessons from the generals: Decisive action amid the chaos of crisis," on McKinsey.com.

This is an edited transcript. For more conversations on the strategy issues that matter, subscribe to the series on Apple Podcasts or Google Play.

Yuval Atsmon: *The coronavirus is a major global crisis that has imposed lockdowns on many communities. It threatens our lives and our economies, a double front that's moving rapidly. The three of you know better than most about how to take decisive action in a crisis, but let me first ask you: Do you think the analogy with war is apt?*

C. Robert Kehler: Well, we have used the wartime analogy for other major public-policy issues: the war on crime, the war on drugs, the war on poverty. I think there are many features of the COVID-19 crisis that lend themselves to this analogy as well. The demands it places on leaders are very much like wartime demands in terms of the need to articulate objectives and priorities and rally the public behind them. Certainly, this requires major national and intelligence organization. It requires planning and mobilization. It requires communication and innovation, a commitment of resources—all the same kinds of things you would talk about during war. It is also warlike in the need for allies. For maybe the first time, the entire world needs to be viewed as an ally in this crisis.

On the other hand, there are significant differences between a war and a global pandemic. Maybe most important, a war is a clash between human beings, and this enemy does not react in a human way. It has no fear. It has no passion. Factors that influence a human enemy have no effect on COVID-19. It doesn't get deterred by anything we do. And it is not going to surrender.

Secondly, all the sacrifice is on the human side. Everybody is at risk. There is no sanctuary. So COVID-19 will have to be defeated in the laboratory before it can be defeated in the field, and that may take a very long time, which requires patience. That will be difficult for our leaders to keep insisting on—especially since there likely won't be any psychological equivalent of victory.

Eric Olson: I think Bob is fundamentally right. There are features that make the comparison to war appropriate. The difference is that the weapon against this enemy is science, and its success will depend on how policy makers use the data that scientists provide. This enemy is more predictable. It can change and morph, of course, but it cannot consciously adapt its strategies based on our actions. And, as Bob said, this is not about geopolitical advantage; the whole world is facing the same threat. There is a challenge and an opportunity in that. And then almost unique for us as Americans is that we are fighting this on our home front.

Michael B. Donley: I would focus on the similarities from the C-suite perspective. The CEO in this context is very much like a commander, and the C-suite staff are like the headquarters staff in a military. In the military, many teams support frontline fighters. Here, we are reminded of what is critical infrastructure in a public-health crisis. We're not only thinking about health and safety issues but also building maintenance, food service, IT. Teamwork across the full capabilities of a corporate staff is vital to keeping the leadership team informed to formulate and execute decisions. And you need to use all of the tools in the toolbox. I used to use a golf analogy: you don't leave any club unused.

Yuval Atsmon: *In terms of the similarity between commanders and executives, I'm hearing from many clients that this is the first time they are facing a crisis where they're responsible for workforces that are scared about both the immediate health risks and the economic risk. What military practices would apply to this situation?*

Eric Olson: Former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld used to talk about the knowns, the known unknowns, and the unknown unknowns. I think we are in the realm of the unknown unknowns. It requires a different kind of leader. This goes beyond uncertainty and into ambiguity. Leaders have to accept more risk because they must make decisions with less knowledge. There is no doctrine or master plan that applies to this.

It is very important that leaders communicate clearly and authentically. They will have to be more comfortable with flattened organizations, but delegating effectively and leading a more empowered organization requires a level of trust that may not exist in many organizations now. Leaders also have to be more tolerant of mistakes that will inevitably occur amid a lack of knowledge. And they will have to apply more imagination in problem solving. The solutions to this crisis will be outside of most leaders' experience, so leaders will need to have bigger ears to hear more—and more diverse—approaches.

Michael B. Donley: Keeping communications open across the C-suite staff is obviously vital. There needs to be a battle rhythm, if you will, that keeps a full flow of information coming into the leadership, an assessment process that the CEO leads and the development of options for the way forward. But on the health and safety aspects, some corporations have had to call in outside help. It is a reminder that sometimes you don't have all the expertise you need on your staff, and when you don't have it you need to find it.

C. Robert Kehler: There is an old saying in the US Air Force: flexibility is the key to air and space power. I think that applies here. Leaders have to be flexible in much more uncomfortable ways than they have ever had to be in the past. And I would pick up on Eric's point about delegating. You have to be uncomfortable in the amount of delegation that you are willing to do.

Also of critical importance for leaders is being able to set a direction and then adjust. We have another saying in the US military: our members act with disciplined initiative. Commanders transmit what we call "commander's intent" and then rely on their people to make the right judgments based on the information they have. That's not always something executives are comfortable doing, but it is critically important now.

Eric Olson: An old mentor of mine used to say, "When the map differs from the terrain, you've got to go with the terrain." That makes many corporate leaders uncomfortable. They like to have guidance, but there is just a lack of guidance here. People will have to adjust to the terrain as they walk it.

Yuval Atsmon: *You all mentioned the need for empowerment and the ability to respond to new information. One emphasis embedded in McKinsey by our early managing director Marvin Bower is to help our clients make fact-based decisions. Military organizations are good at doing that even during very intense times, whereas companies, even during relaxed times, do not always consider all the facts. How do you make sure you have the right information?*

Michael B. Donley: Part of this challenge is the necessity of making decisions without complete information. Facts change, things become clearer, some things become less clear, but you put yourself in an iterative decision-making process in which you can make course corrections in an incremental way.

Eric Olson: Absolutely. There has to be recognition up front that the facts are only facts for a while. We are learning more every day, and that alters what we believed to be facts about the coronavirus. One idea I have seen used with some success is crowdsourcing your network of experts to verify observations and help determine which facts are more real than others. A doctor sees something in a patient and goes online to say, "Has anybody else seen this?" This has been very helpful in sorting some of the facts from the rumors.

Yuval Atsmon: *We are also seeing collaboration in the medical community between not just academics and companies but also competitors to form consortia that can bring solutions quickly, which is an example of the type of crowdsourcing you are talking about.*

C. Robert Kehler: C-suites face an interesting dilemma. They are accustomed to operating in a highly competitive environment, and yet success in this environment is going to depend on sharing. There will still be a tension between a company's need to be competitive and its need to share information. We face a similar tension in the military with the need to protect classified information but have everybody sufficiently informed to be successful on the battlefield. CEOs and corporate leaders will have to be comfortable with getting information from different sources than before and sharing their information in return.

The other tension is between ambiguity and risk. Military commanders deal with those two factors constantly. You never have perfect information and you can never eliminate risk. You can operate with the information you have, you can seek more, and you can manage risk, but you can never eliminate it. Military commanders eventually accept that this is the world they live in. Some CEOs are not comfortable with that at all, because their shareholders do not want them to take much risk.

Yuval Atsmon: *Looking at communication during this crisis, we are seeing a diversity of styles. What do you think is the best way for leaders to communicate right now?*

Michael B. Donley: When crises get serious very quickly, the filters on communication start to go down. There is a need to get information from all available sources and communicate it up, down, and across with the workforce, with shareholders, with your financial institutions, with your customers.

Eric Olson: I think this is an area of particular importance. In crisis, the speed required in decision making tends to cause communication to be conflated with transmission. There is a difference. Communication requires somebody to receive the message, and acknowledge receipt, in the way that you intended it. Hierarchical organizations such as the traditional military structure and large private-sector organizations are not well suited to this. Crisis situations require flatter organizations—networked teams outside the central hierarchy that are able to trust and communicate with each other without the central command knowing everything being said.

C. Robert Kehler: I find that effective leaders tend to be effective communicators. They are not all great orators but they are all effective communicators. In a crisis, that begins with the trust and confidence you have established long before. A crisis is a bad time to try to get your people to trust you.

These days, no one person, group, or institution controls the narrative. A leader of mine once said that you cannot overcommunicate in a crisis, provided those communications are effective not only in volume but in honesty and willingness to lay out both the good and the bad.

Yuval Atsmon: *There is a significant amount of change awaiting us on the other side of this crisis. While we don't know exactly what it will be and how fast economies will recover, executives nevertheless need to plan ahead for that period. Planning across multiple horizons is, again, something military command faces regularly. What can executives learn from that?*

Eric Olson: This is a really good question, and it's fundamental. It is not enough to win the war if you are not prepared for the peace you hope to create. Balancing the urgent and the temporary with the important and the enduring is a real challenge.

Most military organizations have a future-plans group that deals with that—something in the architecture with a separate purpose and set of assumptions. The current operations people operate under a set of assumptions about the nature of the crisis and how to get past it. The future-plans people would operate from assumptions about what the next world will be after at least the highly infectious stage is over. How will we deal with that?

C. Robert Kehler: There is another saying I learned from my colleagues in close combat units: you can't always focus on the five-meter target. You have to be thinking beyond what is immediately in front of you. Typically, in military activities we look at three event horizons. One is current operations: what is happening right now and how to support that, a group focused on future plans, and then the transition to future operations. Those three event horizons are always moving simultaneously as we work through daily operations and all are shaped by the objectives laid out by the commander. Thinking in terms of multiple event horizons is very important, especially in a crisis like this. We don't have all the facts but we should be getting smarter as time passes.

Michael B. Donley: I would make the analogy to the C-suite needing to balance the time given to business development and existing operations. The most stark example I recall from my Pentagon experience was the Desert Storm timeframe. In the early 1990s, planning was underway for a smaller military. The Berlin Wall had already started to come down, the dissolution of the USSR was beginning, Germany was unifying. And yet Desert Storm intervened. Suddenly, there was a great focus on near-term operations, mobilizing capabilities across the military establishment, sending tens of thousands of troops to the Middle East. So we were simultaneously mobilizing military for a conflict and planning for the drawdown of the post–Cold War era.

C. Robert Kehler: Based on my past five or so years of seeing board and industry activities from a different perspective than when I was wearing a uniform, a couple of things jump out at me. One is, we are not saying enough that this crisis will eventually end. There will be an "after" after this. Companies have to recognize that we will move beyond this. And that leads to the point that Eric made about assumptions. Executives need to be careful about the assumptions they make about what things look like afterward and, if they do make assumptions, give them a thorough vetting. You should come up with many views of the future and plan, at least at some level, for all those scenarios. Otherwise, you are taking extraordinary risk that you will get it wrong.

Yuval Atsmon: *Indeed, Bob, we emphasize to clients the importance of using scenarios and understanding what that means in terms of demand and other aspects of business. For companies used to annual budgets driving strategic plans, this is a period of high dynamism in planning and decision making. How do you know when you need to give something more analysis and when you need to take action?*

Michael B. Donley: In my experience, part of the calculus is an assessment of the impact of inaction. If inaction impedes progress, then it is important to move forward, even though you don't have perfect information. Something that is blocking progress—a weak player on your staff, somebody implicated in wrongdoing—needs to be moved to the side so you can objectively assess the situation.

Eric Olson: I agree. Every decision carries some risk. I believe that all risk that needs to be taken should be taken, and no risk that does not need to be taken should be taken. In other words, the right time to make a decision is when it needs to be made. That is very subjective, but that is the art of decision making—it cannot be a science. And the person accountable for the decision's outcome tends to apply the most analysis and best instincts.

This is about not just what decision the leader makes but also how the leader manages decision making within the organization—because decisions ought to be made at every appropriate level. That is empowerment, and empowerment carries with it responsibility. The person who is empowered needs to know it, and it has to be enforced that they make those decisions. For the leader, that carries a certain amount of risk, and that risk has to be understood because not all decisions will be perfect. But the organization will not move forward if the decisions aren't made at the right levels. And, as decisions are made at each level, the people need more than the authority to make them; they need permission, and permission requires some level of resources. To empower somebody to make a decision and not give them permission to make it without coming back to you for money or people isn't empowering—it is only asking people for ideas.

C. Robert Kehler: This is one of those cases where you need to clearly understand what is most important to your organization. That helps you frame the decision-making process Eric just described. Who is involved in the decisions? Who is your kitchen cabinet, and what expertise do they bring? Certainly, right now what is most important are people. A few months ago, executives might have given a different answer. The organization might have prioritized shareholders' perspectives or what Glass Lewis says or their stock price. Now, if a matter affects the safety and health of the people, that helps you set up your decision-making hierarchy, and that will thread through to separating the urgent from the important.

Yuval Atsmon: *How do you deal with a phenomenon I have seen at many companies, which is, once we get excited about an idea and a decision, it is very difficult to say, "Why don't we park that decision until we get more information?" Because the best thing may be not to decide now but wait for more information.*

C. Robert Kehler: Yes, I think you have to be decisive but not reckless. Here, the wartime analogy does not hold up. George Patton famously used to talk about the value of audacity in a commander. I don't think there is any value in being audacious during a global pandemic. Maybe you can be audacious pursuing vaccine clinical trials, but mere decisiveness is not a virtue here. It is being able to make good decisions and understanding the art of command. We talk about command, control, communications. Command is an art. Control is a science. Communications are tools. Ultimately, this is a human endeavor, and the humans at the top have to get the best advice they can.

Yuval Atsmon: *Mike, I want to ask you about something I know you are passionate about, which is learning from mistakes and bringing that mindset into the organizational culture. Can you share your thoughts about how leaders can do that?*

Michael B. Donley: The current communications environment helps to inform leaders when they make mistakes. Reactions and second-guessing of decisions come at the leader from all directions, and it is important to keep your ears open to credible and concerned reaction. That means keeping communications open so you can recognize shortfalls. A government environment includes inspector-general-like functions, auditing functions populated with people willing to stand up and speak truth to power. It's important not to develop antibodies against input from the inside or the outside that end up repelling critical reaction to decisions. You have to be able to recognize when mistakes have been made and own up to them.

I recall how Ronald Reagan handled the Iran-Contra affair. He called in an outside commission. The Tower Commission came through with findings critical of the president, and the president spoke to the nation and admitted his mistakes as a way of enabling himself and the country to move forward. I also recall, during military operations in the Persian Gulf in 1989, a US naval vessel shot down an Iranian airliner by mistake, in a highly crisis-oriented environment, thinking they had shot down an Iranian military aircraft. I literally watched the United States government, as the hours clicked by, assess information coming from various sources, and then the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff stepped out in front of the press and admitted America's mistake and culpability in that terrible tragedy.

Eric Olson: To put that point a different way, organizations can only learn from mistakes if everybody knows the mistake occurred and what the response was. It is crucial for a leader to create an atmosphere of sharing mistakes. A leader has to be able to reward an action even if it led to a mistake, and everybody must see that.

C. Robert Kehler: I would add that the best military organizations I was ever associated with were learning organizations. What made them learning organizations was the value they put on admitting mistakes, and, secondly, they almost all had a critique process. It did not matter what your rank was, when it was time for a critique, everybody sat in the room, the door was closed, and the critique was sometimes very uncomfortable. Those organizations were far better for it because every one of those leaders embraced learning, so everybody else in the organization valued it also.

Yuval Atsmon: *That's a great transition to the last topic, which is around leadership qualities. It is said that character is revealed when pressure is applied. What do you see as the most important things leaders need to get right during this period?*

Eric Olson: This is an opportunity for leaders to understand the character and abilities of their subordinates to operate under pressure. Often, we try to inject pressure where not enough of it naturally exists just to see how leaders respond. Here, we have it on an extraordinary scale. I would urge leaders to create teams, put people in leadership positions, and then carefully watch how they respond so that the organization comes out stronger on the other side.

C. Robert Kehler: I would echo the importance of character-based leadership at every level. This crisis is also showing the critical importance of leaders who can not only communicate effectively but also remain in control, first of all of themselves. They are calm. That does not mean that you don't show any emotion, but you demonstrate a level of control in an uncontrolled scenario and reassure people that they can rely on your judgment. Attributes that allow a leader to rise to the occasion under great stress don't begin when the great stress arrives; they have to be there before.

Michael B. Donley: This crisis is extraordinary in its scope and it cries out for a lessons-learned project on the back end to assess what has gone well, what has not gone as well, what could have been done differently. And it's very important that any leader come out from this process with his or her credibility and trust enhanced. The psychology of leadership and management, the views of the employee base, the market, the financial community, how well the organization functioned in this pressurized environment will be the subject of much review and comment after the fact.

Yuval Atsmon: *One of the characteristics of this crisis that makes it different is people's inability to be together. In many cases, leaders have to communicate with and motivate their teams while everyone is at home, and you cannot know what personal challenges they may be facing. How can corporate leaders maintain staff morale?*

Michael B. Donley: Well, I think the right word for this is empathy. In addition to the need to keep information flowing, you need to infuse it with empathy, to share in the struggle, to recognize the scope of the effort going into crisis response and the sacrifices individuals are making. You need to share in the losses and sad news that sometimes comes and recognize successes, no matter how small, amid the turbulence and uncertainty.

Eric Olson: Yeah. A leader needs to be clear in the purpose and align the workforce around that purpose so that everybody is pulling their oars in the same direction. Survey after survey shows that the most respected leadership qualities are integrity and tenacity. People need to know that the leader is telling them the truth and believe the leader will be there to see them through the crisis. Part of that is sharing facts as they emerge and stopping rumors. In inherently chaotic conditions, morale is built around stability and predictability, wherever it can be provided. That is tough to do but it needs to be a focus.

Steadiness and calmness, as Bob mentioned, are also essential. A leader has to be visible. Culture and morale and standards all depend on the leader, and none of those can be sacrificed in a crisis. A culture left untended will go someplace the leader does not want it to go, and once it does, it's impossible to get back. And a leader has to understand, in my view, that with all the empathy Mike just talked about, standards cannot be sacrificed. The behavior a leader accepts in his or her presence during a crisis becomes the new standard.

C. Robert Kehler: I would avoid being a cheerleader. Your people need to know you are sincere, and that comes from acknowledging that there is both good and bad associated with this crisis. People are taking real risks, they are encountering problems far beyond what the organization has dealt with in the past. So acknowledge the positive but be honest about the dangers. Otherwise, people's fear tends to be magnified the farther away they are from the point of contact. Your ability as a leader to walk down the middle of this road with trust and honesty is critically important.

Eric Olson: I would reinforce the importance of what Bob just said. This notion of only sharing the good news destroys authenticity and integrity. People will not believe what you tell them is good if you don't tell them what is bad as well. There is a leadership study on this called the Stockdale Paradox. Vice Admiral James Stockdale, when he was a captain, was a senior prisoner in Vietnam and his challenge was to communicate an element of hope in a very bad situation. He was able to achieve a balance, and many of the prisoners, when they were released, credited his messages with helping them get through the crisis.

Yuval Atsmon: *That reminds me of a great essay by David Foster Wallace about John McCain and what good leaders are able to achieve.*[1] *A real leader is someone who can make us overcome our limitations and fear and get us to do better and harder things than we thought we could do on our own.*

Before we wrap up, any final advice for executives navigating this crisis?

Eric Olson: One, beware of making permanent decisions while in crisis mode. And, two, when people conclude that their organization is not structured for the crisis, they often create new elements to deal with those aspects. When creating something new to solve a problem, it's a good idea to dismantle what was there that was not working because otherwise it confuses the organization.

C. Robert Kehler: Well, this is an unusual crisis, but it is not the only crisis that we have ever faced. I would encourage our corporate leaders to deal with today's problems but keep a longer perspective.

Michael B. Donley: This is a big reminder of the value of contingency planning and thinking about the more mundane crises that hit corporations, such as earthquakes, fires, floods. It's a reminder to take those threats more seriously and exercise on occasion how you would address them.

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[1] David Foster Wallace, "The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys and the Shrub," *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2000, rollingstone.com.

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