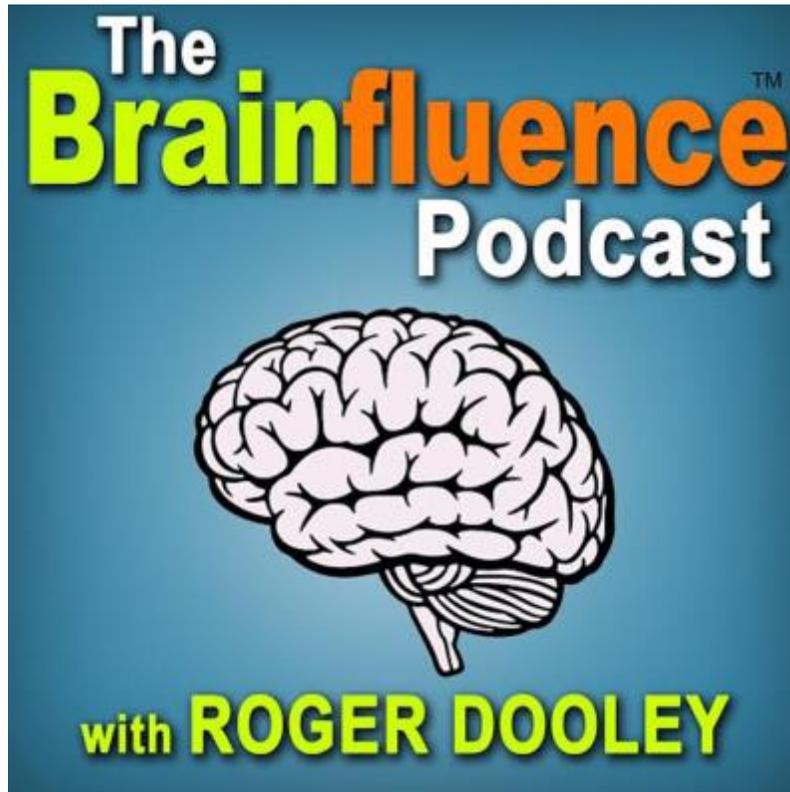


Building a Team of Teams, the Navy Seal Way



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast, I'm Roger Dooley. This week's guest offers what sounds like a familiar business story. He was part of a large, reasonably successful organization with long-established management systems and methods. Different functions in the organization chart may have been well-managed, but had sometimes become somewhat independent fiefdoms that didn't always cooperate and share information. Then an upstart organization appeared on the scene using an Internet, social media, and mobile technology strategy that completely disrupted the status quo. Our guest organization had to adapt by changing its structures and methods in radical ways.

You might think we're talking about the taxi industry and Uber, Walmart, and Amazon, or some other familiar disruption story. We're not. Our guest today is Chris Fussell, a former Navy SEAL who served as aide-de-camp to General Stanley McChrystal, and was part of the dramatic change process that allowed special operations forces in Iraq to quell the rapidly rising insurgency there. Now Chris is a partner in the McChrystal Group Leadership Institute. Chris' new book is *One Mission: How Leaders Build a Team of Teams*, and we'll learn how this same strategies used to build a highly effective leadership and team structure in the special forces area can help businesses be more effective and overcome new and unexpected threats. Welcome to the show, Chris.

Chris Fussell: Hey. Thanks for having me on, Roger. I appreciate it.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well first, thank you for your service. Not many people would volunteer for the exceptionally rigorous training you went

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through, much less the time on the ground in places where you didn't always know who the enemy was.

Chris Fussell: Well, I'm always amazed at the amount of people that are anxiously trying to get into these communities. So it says a lot about who we are as a country.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, that's true, but there are many more of us who probably ... We definitely wouldn't make the cut, and might not find it as desirable as some anyway. So we appreciate your service. As a starting point, one thing I had to overcome was the stereotype that the military is good at things like massive mobilization, but in many ways is a bureaucracy that was stuck in the past with phrases like, "the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way," and making a joke of the term, "military intelligence," are kind of part of our culture. I'm curious as to how true that is, or was it ever true?

Chris Fussell: Well, it's a great start point. All those things are grounded in some sort of history about the enterprise, but in reality, the military ... I spent 15 years on active duty and the SEAL teams. I've been in private industry now for about five years. So I have a sense of both. There are far more similarities between those two spaces than there are differences. Ultimately, it's about people trying to accomplish difficult things in challenging environments. They need to be led by driven and focused leaders. They need to have a sense of why they're there, all the same challenges that industry faces is what the military faces as well.

One of the, I think understandable biases, but definitely inaccurate from my experience is the military, is this idea that, well in the military you can just tell people what to do. That actually never works. Maybe in the movies when you're storming the beach and you tell the private to take the hill, I think even that's an exaggeration. When you get into more complex environments like the military finds itself in today, fighting multidimensional insurgencies all around the world, where you have civilian organizations, you have military components, and multiple teams inside that military, you have host nation government assets, you have civilian populations on the

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ground who have a very legitimate perspective on these fights, this creates this three dimensional chess game that military leaders find themselves inside of.

So telling something what to do in that sort of situation, it's not going to work. There's a deeper level of understanding and shared view on these complex problems that needs to come into play. That was, for me, as I grew up as a military leader, that was an eye opener at every level when you real- ... "Wow, there's a whole 'nother level of complexity going on here that I need to be comfortable with." Very similar to how industry is structured these days.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think that is a common misconception, because we think of the military as being a very hierarchical organization. Because everybody has established ranks and it's probably one of the clearest organization charts that you're going to see. So the fact that it does not always operate as a top-down hierarchy ... Of course, I think that's perhaps part of the strength, too, that the top-down hierarchies rarely work very effectivity, especially as complexity grows. You mentioned insurgencies. Our military has been pretty effective in conventional wars, but historically a little bit less so in dealing with insurgencies. That's what we saw initially in Iraq. Winning a conventional war in short order led to that insurgency that seemed to be metastasizing if anything. Why don't you describe the situation facing you and your colleagues then?

Chris Fussell: Yeah. No. You're right. The last thing you want to do is try to fight the US military in a conventional manner. We don't have real competitors in that space anymore, which is why I think the majority of the world ... And we're seeing this in all sorts of different actors, they're taking a non-traditional approach to how they're engaging with the US and our allies at a strategic level. The insurgency we faced are no different than that. Insurgencies are hard to win. This has been proven historically for generations. What was different about this environment was, comparing it maybe to the insurgency in Vietnam or any other great insurgency that

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we've seen throughout history, historically those were led by really smart people.

Because an insurgent had to have a great idea. They had to have an argument for the population of that nation that said, "Look, we've been led by these people for this many years. Their system isn't working. They misgovern us. Our children are starving. Our economy is failing. Our education system is deplorable," whatever the case may be. They had to build up this argument, and they had to share that in a very secretive way with more and more people over time. Eventually, they build up enough of a followership, some of that followership being ready to take up arms and actually fight state. That was their insurgency.

So they hide for a long time, until they don't have to hide anymore. Then they pop up very quickly and they try to win in as short order as possible. They try to surprise the states, but when they take over, if they win that first insurgent movement, the population who they've been making these promises to for years, they're going to expect them to come through on those promises, fix the education, improve the economy, make sure that the roads are working and our children aren't starving. They've made these guarantees. Now they're under pressure to follow through. As they grow, they're building out a system that's ready to come in and actually take over and run that government. The problem we faced in Iraq initially, and we've seen this spread now globally, is at first we thought, "Wow. These are genius insurgents, because they are doing what we've seen historically, growing their followership and building out an army. But they're doing it exponentially faster than anyone has ever been able to do in the past."

Take Ahmed al-Zarqawi as a good example, the initial insurgent leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Zarqawi was from the town of Zarqa in Jordan. So he was an outsider. He came in, and through very extreme measures, started to build out what we thought was this legitimate army. Our assumption was ... I remember thinking this at the time, "Wow. This guy is an insurgent mastermind, because he's doing this so quickly." He wasn't an insurgent mastermind. In fact, he wasn't even a good insurgent at all,

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because he was alienating the population. He didn't have any system that he was promising to replace the old model with. He wasn't making a big argument about making life better for the population. He was just creating violence. His theory was, enough violence will create a civil war between Sunni and Shia, and eventually this whole system will start to collapse. The US Army will pull out and then into that vacuum we can just inject our ideology. It was a much different approach.

So what we faced, to your point, was this realization that, "Wow. We're just fighting a flash mob. We're fighting these sociopaths that are coming to the fight to work with and beside someone like Zarqawi, who is charismatic, but his methodology is barbaric. So we've got more and more fighters that want to be part of something like that, grounded in this idea, in this frustration that was legitimate, but that emotion was being abused by folks like Zarqawi to create this mob mentality. So you're trying to fight this disparate network through a very traditional top-down structure. That's where the real tensions started to lie, was how do we allow our teams to get into that problem and move throughout it as quickly as it's adapting, without being beholden to checking in with this big system every single time they want to do something next? To your point, that's the initial tension that we started to feel and what our senior leadership ended up solving for.

Roger Dooley: Right. I'll inject one thing. I want you to continue with how you proceeded from there, but the technique that you're describing of an emotional message without necessarily a lot of substance to back it up is not all that uncommon in the world of marketing too. Depending on what you're marketing, sometimes it's the right thing if you're selling an intangible or somewhat tangible product like a fragrance. Okay. That's an emotional sell. In this case, of course, it was marketing a product that really had some very bad ends to it. People are moved by emotion. We saw that in the last election here in the US too, I think. Anyway, continue on, Chris. So faced with this, how did you change the organization, the way it worked?

Chris Fussell: Actually, it's not too different from the point you just made, Roger, which is ... When I'll describe, please know that it happened very

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organically inside this system as it was changing. McChrystal, who was at the forefront of driving this culture change would be the first to admit that there was no master plan that was being implemented. The master plan was, "We're losing. We have to change if we're going to win. Does anybody disagree with that? Okay. Now, let's find what's working, iterate on it. Let's throw out what isn't." That's how we evolved into the model that I'll describe. But a key component of it was creating what we call in One Mission, this sense of an aligning narrative.

Our leadership started to elevate the conversation up to a, to your point, almost a marketing perspective, telling a much more powerful story that everyone wanted to be part of. Breaking this sort of top-down, traditional military approach, which is, my story is I'm part of a SEAL platoon, and I wait for you to give me a mission to execute. What I'm emotionally attached to is my SEAL platoon, to the operators to my left and right. I'm not emotionally attached to the enterprise, because that's just a big thing that gives us information and resources, et cetera, which is a disconnect that you see inside of industry as well. They started to change that conversation and say, "Look, we have a global enterprise comprised of amazing teams" And those are SEAL platoons. Those are Ranger platoons. Those are Army Special Operators. Those are a wide array, and we have civilian components that are critical as well. We have intelligence organizations. We have host nation partners.

Collectively, we are, on paper, one big enterprise. But in reality, what we have is a bunch of individual players, and all those players have great batting averages, to use a baseball analogy. But it doesn't matter if we're all batting 400 if the scoreboard says we're losing, and guess what? The scoreboard says we're losing. So let's start to see ourselves as a team, not as a bunch of individuals at bat. So that was sort of step one in changing the way that we viewed things to say, "Okay. Wait a second. We have a threat, an enemy that is interconnected. They don't have the stability of a big organization. They don't have a centralized plan that makes any sense. But they can move really quickly and create massive disruption on the battlefield. So we have to be able to move that fast as well as a series of

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interconnected teams." Because when one SEAL platoon goes out and touches this network that we're fighting, the network automatically adjusts and reshapes itself.

So the second and third order effects of my operation are going to affect what my Army counterpart down the river should be thinking, not in two days or three days, but literally right now. So how do we start to connect to each other and share information and start to see each other as part of one fight? That aligning narrative that our leadership started to present to us on a very aggressive, daily cadence was, "We are a single team. We are dependent on trusting one another. We have to build a global organization that's built on relationships and understanding others' perspectives. And until we get to that level," which is really saying, "Until our global enterprise operates with the same cultural norms as your little SEAL platoon, then we're never going to be able to move as quickly as we need to."

Presented a challenge to each of us as individual actors in that organization to wake up every day and say, "Am I going to stay comfortable in my SEAL tribe and feel really good and go out and have a good batting average, or am I going to surrender some of my tribal norms and be part of a big, global enterprise, and trust across boundaries, try to see this fight through the eyes of my Army counterpart, or my civilian intelligence counterpart?" That was the challenge that each one of us faced every day, and the reminder that we constantly got from our senior leadership, that if we're a part of this bigger thing, we can actually win in this environment. I think that's critical for organizations across the spectrum to start to see it through that optic in today's world.

Roger Dooley: The first key insight is that the important thing isn't specifically team building, because we know that SEALs and Rangers and so on have really close knit and effective teams. But it's networking those teams and getting them to trust each other, which I would guess would be a rather difficult task at times. I think probably the industry parallel would be in ... Sure we've both seen organizations where you've got, say a sales

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group and manufacturing group, and the manufacturing group thinks that the people in sales are just people who say anything and promise anything to get an order and let the rest of the organization worry about it. The return view isn't much more complimentary. How do you start getting those disparate groups to trust each other?

Chris Fussell: Again, you're exactly right. There's two sides to this that we went through and we've seen work really well in organization. One being, teams need to start to, not just recognize that other entities, like production and sales is a great example, that they see things differently. Everybody gets that at some point. Right? What today demands, the speed with which things are changing in the external environment, what that demands is not always that ... If I'm on sales and you're in manufacturing, production, I need to recognize you see it differently. I need to recognize that your perspective, it could be just as correct as mine. Because you're seeing a different part of this fast changing network. And you need to respect that what I'm seeing, even though it might contradict in some ways your view, could also be correct. Because the problem's changing too quickly. It's not static. I have to recognize and appreciate that we can see things differently and both be correct.

The only way you could overcome that is we trust each other, and we have a tie into what the organization is trying to accomplish at the strategic level. I can trust that you see things from a unique optic. I can trust that they're right from your lens, and based on our common understanding we're accomplishing, I'm going to see and say, "You know what? Production should take the lead on this decision, and sales will step back," or vice versa.

That's the second component, which is, leadership creating an environment where everyone has access on a fast enough cadence to your overarching vision for where we're headed, so that we can decentralize those points of conflict between those different teams, and come up with answers that are right in the moment. That was a hugely important step for us to be able to see the fight through other people's optics.

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Roger Dooley: Chris, one objection that I can see people raising is that, a military special forces in particular, are unique group. They've gone through this really selective screening process, training that would kill the average person, and really enjoy an elite status. They're motivated. They take pride in their skill, in their work. Nobody's phoning it in. The average employee, on the other hand, probably does not really have that same level of commitment to their job. They may not be totally checked out, but they may not even see their job as central to their life at that time. Can we translate these lessons that come from special forces and the military into more normal business settings?

Chris Fussell: It's a good question, Roger. The short answer is absolutely. I say that based on work that we've done in multiple different spaces with the work that McChrystal Group does, from technology to banking to consumer goods, healthcare, energy. We've worked across a wide variety of different types of people that are attracted to those spaces, and we've consistently seen one fact. That is, there's far more talent and drive inside of an enterprise than we give it credit for. So, there certainly are unique type of people in special operations. We've had a joking conversations with people in big industry saying, "I want my sales team to be like Navy SEALs." My response is, "Trust me. You don't want that. They'll break a lot of things and it'll cost you a lot of money."

There's different types of people that are meant for different sorts of things. Right? In every organization that we've worked inside of, there's latent talent in that system a model like this can tap into. There's also a very basic human drive, relevant to what we were just talking about, that wants to be connected to something that matters. All of us want to be part of a bigger story. It's in our DNA for as long as there have been humans on the planet. This is part of what we dive into in the early discussions inside of One Mission. This is wired into who we are as a species. So leaders that can acknowledge that and tap into it and say, "Look. Here's the bigger story we're creating here." For us that was, "Our story right now is we're losing, and none of us are hard wired to do anything but win. So here's how we're

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going to create that. We're going to create a new sort of culture. We're going to trust each other. We're going to build relationships."

That became the driving story of our organization, and we tapped into spaces that weren't intuitively part of how we'd operated around creating cross-boundary relationships and really focusing on who we were as a culture, as opposed to the types of missions we were doing on the ground. So, we learned to change and adapt and find new skills. You see the same sort of thing in industry. People have a job because they want to be part of something. If leaders can give them a higher level message, it unleashes amazing capabilities inside of the enterprise.

Roger Dooley: Your typical corporation has an org chart, perhaps not unlike a military organization chart. Are you talking about blowing up your organization chart or rather, working mostly within that chart and creating this network effect?

Chris Fussell: Yeah. No. Not at all. We didn't blow up our org chart, and the work we do doesn't involve org redesign. In my opinion, a lot of org redesign is a 20th century approach where we see a problem, we say, "Well, let's redesign ourselves." By the time you redesign yourselves the problem's changed six times. So you change again. You get a little performance spike every time you shuffle things around, but overall in today's environment, that's not going to answer the mail. McChrystal, when he oversaw this change inside our military environment, this was not a org redesign. He didn't shuffle parts around. He certainly couldn't do that with all the other agencies we had to partner with in this.

This was about communication, culture change, cross-boundary relationships. In the work that we do now, what we find most effective is creating this hybrid model that we discuss in One Mission. Leave your org chart as it is. Change it if you see that as necessary as we go through this process, but ultimately, what we're going to become is what works for us, where you have this traditional, bureaucratic model in the background, which this is not an attack on bureaucracy. A bureaucracy provides stability, predictability around growth and numbers. It gives you a way to

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communicate with other like-structured organizations. There's a ton of important things that still happen inside of that approach, but layered inside of that, the hybrid side of this model is a network-based functionality, creating those cross-boundary relationships, being comfortable with distributed communication and decentralized decision rights.

Our system had this traditional military structure constantly in the background that gave us that stability to our approach, but every day these sub networks were allowed to redesign themselves so that a SEAL platoon on the ground approaching one problem could quickly learn from a Ranger platoon on the other side of the fight, who gathered a new piece of information, and those two elements ... One of them might be in a gun fight at the moment ... could readjust themselves to how they were seeing this connected network. Historically, that could have never happened, because both those units would have to come back into the mothership, share the information up, someone would say, "Well, here's what we're going to do next." And by the time you do the next thing, it's already dated. So you're always one step behind the problem.

Roger Dooley: Right. It's not only information sharing, but problem resolution too, right? I think the traditional corporate, the way of resolving problems is if you have two groups that can't quite agree, they kick it up to the VP level or something and say, "Hey, we can't agree. Can you help us sort this out?" Where to be really effective, they need to have a mechanism for just dealing with that at that same level.

Chris Fussell: No. That's exactly right. I'm sure a lot of your listeners will relate what I'll describe here, which is, historically you ... And we cover a lot of this in One Mission. The history of organizations was based on being able to read your environment. So you come up with a master plan. You come up with a playbook on how you're going to run your bureaucracy. Historically, management was run like this for generations, where I can cascade responsibilities down level by level, come up with metrics to measure performance. Then occasionally, you'll see something that's out of bounds of the existing rule set. That's when you and I say, "Well, we can't

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solve this at our level. Let's go to the VP above us and they can make a decision." Sometimes it would cascade all the way up, but those were rare occurrences. There was an incremental, just assumption that occasionally this will pop up, but for the most part, I will live in my vertical or my cubicle and solve all the problems that I'm tasked with.

Now those out of bound problems are happening, not monthly, not weekly, multiple times per day. Whenever we work with enterprise, they say, "Yeah. I'm flooded with putting out fires all day." And all those fires are ... If they could be solved through the traditional playbook, they would be. Those are out of bound issues that now arise, not day by day, but minute by minute sometimes. No one's free to do the up and out strategic thinking. Everyone's getting sucked down in to the problems. You see this in business. You see this is the way governments are now functioning. Everybody gets sucked in to the most tactical-level issue going on around the world. Who's solving for the grand strategy, the bigger issues that need to be addressed? No one! Because no one has the bandwidth.

What this model allowed for was you and I as maybe peers on the org chart to have contextual understanding of the strategy and being empowered to make new decisions at our level. So we could see something that's out of bounds of the playbook and say, "Well, here's our strategy. Here's how our senior leadership things. So we're going to do the following." And we solve for it in real time. The next time we resynchronize, we say, "Look. Here's what arose. Here's how we solved for it." That's a wholly different way of approach an interconnected problem.

Roger Dooley: One change that's affecting organizations today is the gig economy. In many cases, corporations don't have as many employees as they used to. Now we've got independent operators who may work on one project and not any others. People may rotate through and you've got both less control and perhaps less predictability. In your work with businesses, has this come up as an issue, and can you deal with it in an effective way?

Chris Fussell: It's starting to more and more. I think it's a trend that is going to continue to advance. Because the Information Age allows us to

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move individual actors with such ease and fluidity, then more and more areas will become dominated by this sort of gig economy approach. What I would argue is, creating this hybrid structure allows you to leverage that to your great advantage. Once an enterprise is comfortable saying, "Look. Here's what need to remain inside of our traditional playbook, because it allows us to do the following things with stability and predictability. Here are the things that we're comfortable leveraging through a decentralized model."

Those can be a full time actors in your system that just act in a very decentralized fashion, or they can be plug ins in the gig economy approach and say, "Look. Here's a temporary thing," and they're going to bolt on. They're going to unlink from the industry, depending on the problems we're seeing on the ground. As that gets further and further into the system and people become comfortable with that, I could now be a multiple level down mid- or junior-level actor that has the authority to operate both inside the traditional system, or with the bolt-ons that are more natural in a very fluid gig economy system. Organizations that become more comfortable with that approach are going to quickly accelerate beyond folks that are just trying to stick to one system or the other.

Roger Dooley: Chris, I want to be respectful of your time. I wonder if you could share with us perhaps one of your ... The book has plenty of case studies in it. If you could share with us one brief example of a business that went through this kind of change that our listeners could relate to.

Chris Fussell: Yeah. There are a series of case studies in there that folks different industry doing this sort of work. I'll give you an example. It's near and dear to me because I spent a lot of time with them and their team. Brad Smith, the CEO of Intuit, has been with that company for many years. We did some work with them a few years ago, and the challenge that Brad faced was admittedly, from his own account, he said, "Look. We built a model here at Intuit that is built around verticals of Turbo Tax and Quicken and all these other great products that were their own business units in their own rights." He said, "I'm now in a system where I need to start

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connecting all of these, because I have a consumer base that expects one-stop shopping for all of their needs. So how do I connect all of these different verticals?"

Brad stepped back after talking to his senior leaders and said, "I need to give this aligning narrative. I need an overarching ... " what he called his north star, that they could believe in at a higher level. Right? So once he had done that work, which was a few months to get that narrative exactly right, then he could start putting communication structures where each of these business units could start to connect across boundaries and say, "Here's how our view on the market," or, "our product supports each other cross-functionally. So we're now incentivized not to just run in our vertical, but we also want to connect across these boundaries."

In Brad's words, it gave him the language to explain how Intuit was a single unit. He used the term, "one Intuit." That's how he started to explain his organization to the street and to their partners and to their consumers, who had started to question whether or not there was one organization or was it multiple verticals? As soon as outside actors said, "No. There's one single Intuit, and they're all components of supporting that mission," the ROI was instantaneous. All of those components started to have a really different view on how well the organization was being run.

Roger Dooley: Well, great. Let me remind our listeners. We're speaking with Chris Fussell, former Navy SEAL and author of the new book, *One Mission: How Leaders Build a Team of Teams*. Chris, how can our listeners find you and your content online?

Chris Fussell: Well, they can go to the McChrystal Group, our web page, and get a good sense of all the work that we do in industry, or if they're interested in *One Mission*, they can pick it up there on our website or it's available at the major distributors, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, et cetera.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, we will link to those places and any other resources we mentioned on the show on the show notes page at

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rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a handy PDF text version of our conversation there too. Chris, thanks so much for being on the show.

Chris Fussell: Thanks, Roger. I appreciate it. Great discussion.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.