

# Leadership: Evolving through Uncertainty

AUGUST 2020

## JON FUSSELL

Lieutenant Commander  
US Navy SEAL (Retired)



Jon Fussell spent his entire 20-year military career in the Naval Special Warfare Community. He led the country's most elite units on hundreds of direct-action combat missions, serving in leadership roles on multiple SEAL Teams, before becoming a Troop Commander at Joint Special Operations Command's Naval Special Warfare Development Group.

After retiring, he founded Patriot Leadership Development, which provides practical leadership training to senior executives and their teams around the world.

Jon holds an Executive MBA degree from the Duke University Fuqua School of Business and a master's degree in Defense Analysis from the Naval Postgraduate School.

## Never stop working the problem

Having a mindset of continuous improvement is critical. True leaders have this mentality. They're lifelong learners who continually try to better themselves and those around them.

For that reason, leaders also include lifelong learners on their teams. They know the importance of leveraging everything they can to its maximum effectiveness. Building the right team is critical — however, effectively leveraging their collective mental horsepower is a gamechanger.

*Building the right team is critical — however, effectively leveraging their collective mental horsepower is a gamechanger.*

That doesn't change just because circumstances force a team to become more distributed. The military has always needed to be able to work in distributed teams: If your boss is headed to Iraq, while you're in Kabul and your team is spread out over the rest of Afghanistan, you figure out what you need to make it work.

## COVID-19 has highlighted deficiencies in the workplace

Companies have pivoted to virtual workplace solutions during the pandemic, and teams have become more distributed. This has challenged workers' situational awareness, as many companies lack contingency plans to quickly adapt to such changes. Groups led by micromanagers are particularly vulnerable and less productive.

What's most important, however, is to learn from what's happening right now — and evolve to face it.



INVESTMENTS

***Groups or processes tend to have managers, but teams have leaders.***

*As Lieutenant Commander Fussell points out:*

*“I’ve never had anybody ‘manage’ us out of a firefight.  
People step up and they lead.”*

*Processes and systems need to be managed, while people need to be led. If you put a manager with a team, or a leader with a process, it just doesn’t work.*

---

*“What got you here, won’t get you there.” — Marshall Goldsmith*

---

**Don’t fight your previous war**

Before 9/11, the United States armed forces were training on tactics from Vietnam —the last sustained campaign in which the U.S. special operations community had seen combat.

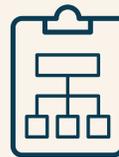
When the war with Afghanistan began, leaders had to evolve their strategies drastically. This taught them a valuable lesson, which they put to use a short while later, when they deployed to Iraq: When new challenges arise, don’t just run your previous plays, but identify and focus on the areas you need to evolve. The next big challenge probably won’t be another pandemic, but leaders will still be ready to adapt and face it.

---

**Shift to empowered leadership**

Micromanagement can significantly hamper adaptation. It’s harder to move forward when you ask for every detail and request to be copied on all communication. A more empowering leadership strategy is more agile.

- **Commander’s intent** — Give people their marching orders and let them march.
- **Commander’s critical intelligence requirements** — Tell your team the situational threshold you expect them to handle and the point at which they should elevate.
- **Pull vs. push** — Know who needs a push, and who’s willing to go further, even if they sometimes need pulling back.
- **Fire & forget weapons** — Identify your team members who can be given a task and run with it.

**Fitting these components together**

You’ve empowered your team to handle any situation up to a level 8. They take care of anything below, and let you know how it went later. For things 8.1 or above, they call you immediately.

Occasionally, you want a call saying someone had to take down a level 9 situation, because time was critical. Whether they were successful or not, you’ll learn something about them. Regardless, they’re not now cleared to level 9, so you still rein them back to 8.

On the other hand, if someone’s routinely calling you about level 5 or 6 scenarios, something needs to change.

## Adjust your battle rhythm

Leaders will create a routine that works for their organization and empowers their team. That routine needs to be sustainable in order to prevent burnout, but also efficient—don't mistake activity for productivity.

As leaders evolve and empower their teams, these teams will contribute more to the overall organization's success. Truly empowered teams will be able to suggest and develop their own assignments to serve company goals.

### LCDR Fussell describes F3EA



“Pre 9/11, we had this idea that during war someone would automatically hand us missions every day. In Afghanistan, we quickly found out that if we wanted to work, we had to generate relevant missions ourselves. To do this, we utilized the **F3EA** targeting cycle: **Find** the target; **Fix** the location; **Finish** the job; **Exploit** our findings; **Analyze** everything. And this would lead us to our next mission.”

## Create contingency plans

Once leaders have the right team in place, they need to plan how to keep operating if they lose someone. Most organizations have contingencies in case processes or equipment fails, but they're not as prepared when personnel become unavailable (e.g., during a pandemic). Leaders can answer three vital questions:

1. What are the key processes and functions your business needs to operate?
2. When inputs and access change, what happens to those critical operations?
3. How do you respond to keep your business from failing when the unexpected happens?

### Backups for the backups



Combat teams have personnel contingency plans that highlight the need for cross-training among team members. Leaders will have a primary and secondary plan for every function.

## Don't discount the human factor

To some extent, it can always be said that “these are uncertain times.” Though, amid a global pandemic and civil unrest, it may be fair to say that sentiment is particularly fitting today. Leaders will evolve their tactics, themselves, and their teams to face this uncertainty.

*Leaders will evolve their tactics, themselves, and their teams to face this uncertainty.*

A lot of teams who've been together for years or decades have adapted well to the new environment. However, the new hire who's being onboarded 100% remotely might not feel the same way, yet.

Humans grow when they encounter anguish, whether emotional, mental or physical. Everyone has experienced that anguish, in one form or another, and substantially more are today. With so many going through so much, we can't overlook the human factor right now.

Taking the time to stop, thank your people, and acknowledge what they're doing will help your team members grow and grow tighter.

*Lieutenant Commander Fussell, on successful leadership:*

*“Successful leaders will make the call and stand by it.”*

## **Maintain front-site focus**

When taking aim, you always want to have a clear, crisp view of what’s ahead. Never lose sight of the next ridgeline — and what capabilities you’ll need to surmount it.



The views expressed herein are from Jon Fussell and do not necessarily reflect the views of New York Life Investment Management LLC or its affiliates. Jon Fussell is not affiliated with New York Life Investment Management LLC.

This material is intended to be educational and informative in nature; is subject to change; and is not intended to be a forecast of future events or a guarantee of future results. This information should not be relied upon by the reader as research or investment advice regarding the funds or any particular issuer/security. The information discussed is strictly for illustrative and educational purposes and is not a recommendation, offer or solicitation to buy or sell any securities or to adopt any investment strategy. There is no guarantee that any information discussed will be effective.

“New York Life Investments” is both a service mark, and the common trade name, of certain investment advisors affiliated with New York Life Insurance Company.

Not FDIC/NCUA Insured

Not a Deposit

May Lose Value

No Bank Guarantee

Not Insured by Any Government Agency