

It Starts at The Top

by Paul Marcone, President, Ox Hill Leadership Tours

Organizational dysfunction is a growing problem in both the public and private sectors. It's certainly a major issue for the managers I have worked with over the past year in leadership seminars across the country.

Because my seminars draw on the leadership lessons from the American Civil War, I am always looking for concrete examples to instruct, inspire and educate today's leaders.

One excellent example of a leader dealing with organizational dysfunction is Ulysses S. Grant.



In March of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln named Grant General-in-Chief of all the Union armies. The Civil War had been raging for three years. While the Union had made significant gains in the West, the war effort in the East remained a stalemate. With the shining exception of the Battle of Gettysburg fought a year earlier, the Army of the Potomac had endured three years of pounding and humiliation at the hands of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

The Union army had developed an inferiority complex when it came to Lee. Its officers were intimidated by Lee's audacity and aggressiveness. So when Grant assumed his duties as General-in-Chief in the spring of 1864, he decided he would remain with the Army of the Potomac during the spring campaign.

Grant recognized that this army was, in fact, a dysfunctional organization.

While Grant had no doubt about the courage and fighting ability of the men in the ranks, he harbored great doubts about the mental toughness, aggressiveness and leadership abilities of the army's senior officer corps.

Grant was determined to change the dysfunctional culture of the army. He got his chance in short order. In early May of 1864, Grant directed the Army of the Potomac to launch an offensive against Lee's army in the tangled Wilderness just west of Fredericksburg, VA. For two days, Grant's men grappled with Lee's vaunted soldiers. By the end of the second day's fighting, Grant's army had been fought to a bloody standstill by Lee - who had counterattacked repeatedly, despite being outnumbered 2 to 1.

Lee's aggressive tactics unnerved many of the army's officers. That evening Grant's headquarters was in a state of confusion. Conflicting reports kept pouring in from the field. Walking wounded passed by telling tales of disaster. Through it all, Grant sat on a camp stool, puffed on his cigar, read through all the reports and calmly issued orders.

The battle had reached a critical point.

The Union army had incurred horrible casualties. It had been savagely attacked on both flanks, and had almost been cut off from its supply line. During that long day, Grant had patiently endured all the talk of gloom and doom coming from the army's officers.

Author Gordon Rhea in his excellent book, *The Battle of the Wilderness*, picks up the story...

At the height of the excitement, an officer rushed to Grant and urgently volunteered advice. "I know Lee's methods well by past experience; he will throw his own army between us and the Rapidan, and cut us off completely from our communications." Grant stood, pulled the cigar from his mouth, and spoke his mind. "Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do," he roared back with unaccustomed heat at the startled officer. "Some of you seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do."

Grant's instincts were correct. The crisis was not half as bad as many of the officers had thought, and it soon passed. Most important, Grant's uncharacteristic outburst was heard by many of the army's senior officers.

The message was crystal clear: negative thinking was no longer going to be tolerated.

With that one outburst, Grant was well on his way to changing the culture of defeatism that had infected the Army of the Potomac.

Despite 30,000 casualties (almost a quarter of his strength), Grant ordered the army to keep moving south. The days of retreating and resting in camp for months on end after a tough battle were long past. Grant's determined leadership pushed the army forward, always forward.

The culture of the Army of the Potomac did not change overnight. But, it did eventually change. Grant's persistence and vision paid off. Less than a year later Grant would accept the surrender of Lee's army and the long, bloody Civil War would be over.

When dealing with a dysfunctional organization, a leader needs to make clear that certain behaviors, attitudes and actions will no longer be tolerated. A leader needs to be consistent and determined in pursuing culture change. It's not easy and it does not happen overnight. But, it will happen with the right leadership, vision and tenacity.

To learn more about how you and your team can benefit from the leadership lessons of the American Civil War, check out Ox Hill Leadership Tours at www.oxhilltours.com or contact them directly at 703-531-8837 or info@oxhilltours.com.