

Moments in Leadership

March 2015: Risk Taking

By Paul Marcone

Last week I had the privilege of facilitating seminars in Georgetown, Texas and Wichita Falls, Texas on the leadership lessons from the Battle of Gettysburg. All of the participants were city employees in management positions. At both seminars we had excellent discussions on a number of topics.



One of the more illuminating discussions focused on the issue of risk-taking. Namely, is it appropriate for city employees to take risks? If yes, what kind of risks should city employees take? The general consensus was that, yes, risks should be taken in city government, but they should be calculated risks with measurable rewards and manageable downsides. And it was agreed that decisions to take risks should be made in a collaborative manner with open communication between leaders and subordinates and vice versa.

One of the leadership lessons from the Battle of Gettysburg that spurred these discussions was the experience of Union General John Reynolds. On the morning of July 1, 1863, John Reynolds commanded the left wing of the Union Army of the Potomac. Reynolds was part of an organization that had been thoroughly beaten over the past year in battle after battle by the legendary Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

The Army of the Potomac was an organization rife with petty rivalries and political factions. Close oversight from Congress combined with weak leadership had created an army that was risk-averse and used to losing. But Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in June of 1863 held out promise for the Army of

the Potomac to turn over a new leaf. It had a new commander - George Gordon Meade - a no-nonsense career soldier with no political agenda.

Meade had appointed his close friend and most trusted subordinate, John Reynolds, to command the army's left wing during those tense days in late June as the Army of the Potomac marched north attempting to head off Lee's army as it marauded through Western Maryland and Southern Pennsylvania.

On the morning of July 1, 1863 Reynolds, followed closely by some of the finest infantry in the Union army, arrived on the fields west of the key crossroads town of Gettysburg, PA to confer with Union cavalry commander John Buford. Throughout that morning Buford's 2,500 troopers fended off wave after wave of Confederate infantry. They were on the verge of breaking. On his ride to Gettysburg Reynolds took note of the excellent high ground south of town. It was ground that commanded several important roads guarding Baltimore and Washington – roads that would allow the Union army to easily concentrate, form a defense and, if the opportunity arose, launch a counter-attack.

In past battles, the Army of the Potomac invariably retreated when confronted with any kind of setback. On this fateful morning, Reynolds made the decision to fight it out. He knew that he was temporarily outnumbered and his decision could result in yet another disastrous defeat.

But Reynolds also knew that if his troops could hold out long enough, the bulk of the Union army would be on the field by day's end and occupy the choice ground south of town. That would put the Union army in an excellent position to win. Given the stakes, it was a risk worth taking.

So Reynolds hastened forward his infantry and ordered them into the fight. He kept his immediate superior, Meade, well informed and advised Meade to concentrate the entire army at Gettysburg. In his last message to Meade he vowed to barricade the streets of town if necessary until the rest of the army got there. Meade was encouraged by Reynolds' aggressiveness and set in motion a series of events that would lead to the gigantic three day battle at Gettysburg – a battle that resulted in a crucial Union victory.

While the war would still go on for almost two more years after Gettysburg, the Union victory there was a much needed boost for the Union war effort and a significant setback for the Confederates. It marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. It also gave the soldiers in the Army of the Potomac a huge psychological victory.

Tragically, John Reynolds was killed shortly after his arrival on the field at Gettysburg. By taking a calculated risk in fighting it out at Gettysburg, John Reynolds was being counter-cultural. In one bold move he broke the cycle of defeatism that had infected the officer corps of the Army of Potomac.

Sometimes leaders have to take risks. Those decisions should never be taken lightly. But risk-taking is an attribute of any successful leader. We owe our existence as a nation to leaders like John Reynolds who had the courage and integrity to take the right risks at the right time.

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