

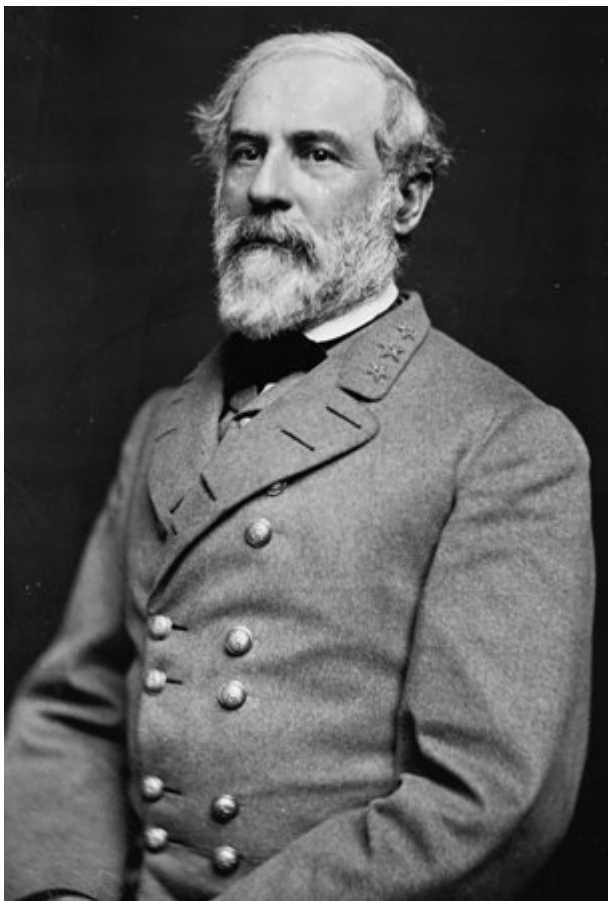
MOMENTS IN LEADERSHIP

April 2012: Communicate Clearly

Robert E. Lee and Day One at Gettysburg

In examining leadership, one critical quality is the ability to communicate clearly. In 2004 the Army War College conducted a [study on leadership](#). A key finding was that interpersonal skills are more critical to good leadership than technical know-how. The study identified a list of the most critical leadership behaviors. Using an incident from the Battle of Gettysburg, this month we will focus on one of these key behaviors: ***clearly explains missions, standards and priorities.***

Fought from July 1-3, 1863, Gettysburg was the largest battle of the Civil War and the bloodiest three days in American history. Some 50,000 men were killed, wounded or captured.

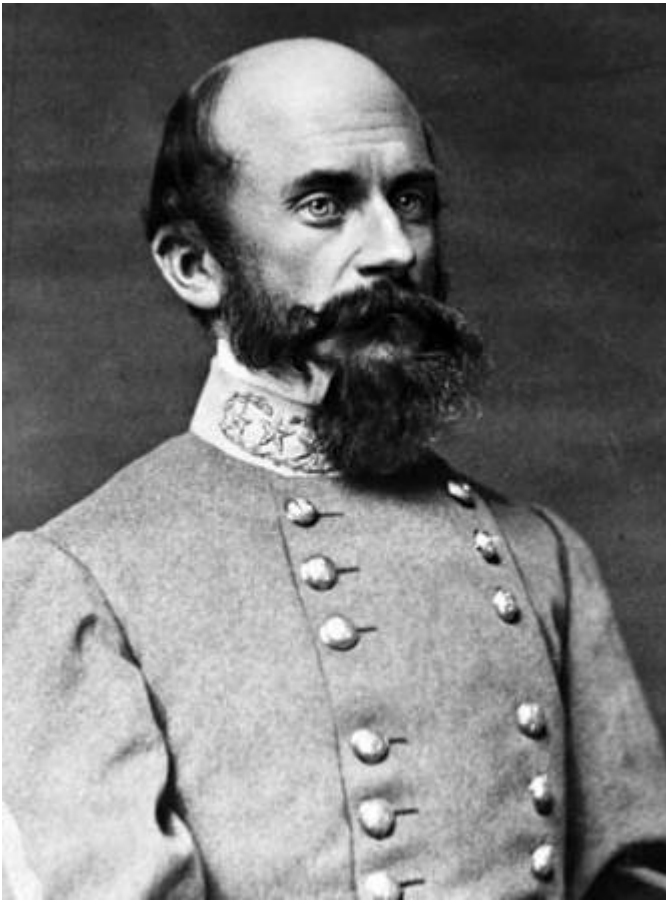


The commander of the Confederate Army at Gettysburg was Robert E. Lee. At Gettysburg, Lee had been in command for 13 months and had already become a legend. Although significantly outnumbered he had won an impressive string of victories. But he had not been able to deliver a “knock out” blow to the Union— one that would cripple the Union war effort and bring foreign recognition to the young Confederacy.

Leading up to Gettysburg, Lee had led a successful management team that worked seamlessly together. That team featured Lee as commander aided by his two top subordinates: James Longstreet and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. However, Jackson was mortally wounded two months before Gettysburg at the Battle of Chancellorsville. Lee was forced to reorganize his army and promoted two successful “middle managers” -- division commanders Richard Ewell and A.P. Hill -- to

his top management team. Both were untested in “senior-level management.”

By late afternoon of day one at Gettysburg Lee’s army seemed to have won yet another victory. The Union army had been driven from its positions north and west of town, and was retreating. But Lee could see that the victory was not yet won. The enemy was regrouping on a prominent hill south of Gettysburg(Cemetery Hill). Lee had an opportunity to win a crushing victory if he could drive the enemy off Cemetery Hill. Lee issued a written order to Ewell to “take that hill, if practicable.” In previous battles Lee had issued similar orders to the legendary Stonewall – knowing that Stonewall would know what Lee wanted done.



But Ewell was not Jackson.

To Ewell the order was confusing and unclear. His troops had marched hard all morning and had fought a tough battle that afternoon. He also had to deal with handling thousands of Union prisoners. Finally, he was getting reports of enemy forces approaching his left flank.

Precious minutes slipped by as Ewell tried to figure out what to do.

At long last, Ewell sent a message back to Lee stating that he might be able to take the hill if he received support. The closest troops available belonged to A.P. Hill, who was at Lee’s side. Hill was adamant that his troops were exhausted and his only reserves could not support Ewell. Lee accepted Hill’s arguments at face value -

even though the battle’s outcome hung in the balance and Lee knew that several fresh divisions were to arrive shortly and would be available as a reserve. Lee reluctantly sent a message back to Ewell stating that no supports were available.

The end result was that Ewell never attacked “that hill” on day one. For the next two days thousands of Lee’s soldiers were killed or wounded trying to take “that hill.” They never succeeded.

Lee lost the battle of Gettysburg. Part of the reason was that he was not able to get his new management team to act in concert and carry out Lee's vision. A lion's share of the blame lies with Lee. The old general failed to clearly explain to Ewell or Hill the vital nature of the mission on the late afternoon of day one. Ewell and Hill had been heavily involved in several hours of desperate fighting. They both had tunnel vision and could only see the situation through the narrow prism of their own situation. Lee, on the other hand, did see the big picture. But he did not communicate this clearly and paid the price for his lack of clarity.

Lee also didn't take into consideration the personalities of the newest members of his team. Lee learned the hard way that, unlike Stonewall, Ewell and Hill needed clear orders and close supervision.

What are the lessons in this incident for today's leaders?

First, take the time to talk to subordinates face to face whenever possible - especially on critical assignments. Resist the temptation to send a text or email if face-to-face communication is possible. Leaders communicate as effectively with body language and voice inflections as much as they do with words.

Second, make sure that your communications are not only clear but also that they are understood.

Third, get to know the people on your team – their strengths and weaknesses. Make sure you put your people in situations that accentuate their strengths and put people around them to bolster areas of weakness.

One general note. Keep in mind that everything you do communicates something to the people around you. In his book, *Visionary Leadership*, Burt Nanus noted that:

“Leaders communicate in many ways. In fact, it is hard for them not to communicate, for they are so closely watched, referred to, and emulated that whatever they do or say – even what they don't do or say – communicates volumes to others. The only question, then, is what leaders choose to communicate and how they choose to do so.”

A critical part of leadership is clear and effective communication. Something that has not changed in the 148 years since Lee met with disaster at Gettysburg.