

# ***Moments in Leadership***

## **August 2013: When You Need To Save The Boss...**

Sometimes as a leader, you have to take action to help your boss save his or her self from disastrous action. That is usually easier said than done.

One of the more difficult things that leaders have to do in the work place is confront a boss to prevent them from taking action that you know will hurt your organization in a big way.

In this month's installment of "*Moments in Leadership*" I examine this dilemma through the eyes of Union General John Reynolds and his experience at the Civil War Battle of Second Manassas in August of 1862.



It is 3:30pm on August 30, 1862. The place: Manassas, Virginia. Union General John Reynolds, commands the Pennsylvania Reserve Division in General Irwin McDowell's III Corps, Union Army of Virginia. From his position atop Chinn Ridge, south of the Warrenton Turnpike, Reynolds has just witnessed the failure of fellow Union General John Fitz Porter's attack on the center of the Confederate line along an unfinished railroad cut north of the turnpike.

Suddenly, Reynolds' boss, General McDowell, approaches riding fast and waving his arms, shouting in great alarm: "Get your men into line and move away from there!"

At this critical moment in the battle, Reynolds realizes that his boss is ordering his 7,000 men to move north, across the turnpike to support the collapsing Union center -- and away from its position protecting the Union army's vulnerable left flank.

Reynolds knows that such a move would leave the Union army's left flank dangerously exposed to the thousands of Confederate troops that he knows are massed in front of him.

These enemy troops are from Confederate General James Longstreet's corps. Reynolds has been aware of Longstreet's presence on the battlefield since noon yesterday (over 27 hours), when his men encountered them in the woods in front of your position south of the Groveton crossroads. Despite several attempts by Reynolds and others to communicate this vital intelligence that a new threat has appeared on the Union Army's left, Commanding Union General John Pope has discounted or ignored the reports. At one point, earlier today (about noon) Reynolds took the unusual action of riding through enemy artillery fire directly to General Pope's headquarters, bypassing the chain of command, to report that the Confederates were poised to "turn the flank" of the Union army. General Pope's dismissive response was: "Oh, I guess not."

Now Reynolds' immediate superior - who appears to have panicked – is ordering him to undertake a move that Reynolds knows will leave the flank of the army almost entirely unprotected. This is a critical moment in a battle only a few miles from the nation's capital. What do you do?

In the back of General Reynolds' mind could be the new Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War which has been hauling Union generals into the Capitol for closed hearings on a wide range of battlefield failures and perceived disloyalty to the Union. The Union army fighting on the fields of Manassas on those hot summer days of late August 1862 was an army filled with political intrigue, poor morale, infighting and shifting loyalties.

Reynolds did not have much time to make his decision. In the end he decided to follow orders and shifted most of his division north of the turnpike, leaving only a small brigade of New Yorkers to defend the vulnerable Union left flank. This brigade was quickly overrun when Longstreet launched his flank attack.

Heroic stands made by valiant Union brigades and regiments – many of them funneled into the maelstrom by a shaken General McDowell – saved the Union Army from total defeat that fateful day. As it was, the Union Army was forced to retreat back into the outer defenses of Washington, DC– a defeated, demoralized army that had once again been outgeneraled. It was the low point for the Union.

While that army would live to fight another day and eventually win the war some three years later, hundreds of thousands Americans had to die to achieve that

victory.

Hindsight is always 20/20, but historians have always wondered how the Battle of Second Manassas would have turned out had Reynolds disobeyed orders and stayed put to defend the Union left flank. Without question, the outcome would have been a lot different.

As a leader, when you see your boss making a terrible decision – one that you know will have disastrous consequences for your organization – you have to make the tough decision to stand up and risk your career to do the right thing.

As General Reynolds learned in August of 1862, there are no good and clear cut choices. Perhaps we can learn something from General Reynolds and summon up the courage to confront a boss when we see clearly that a decision will be disastrous.

*For information on how your organization can learn the leadership lessons from the Civil War, contact Ox Hill Leadership Tours at 703-531-8837 and [info@oxhilltours.com](mailto:info@oxhilltours.com). Or visit our website at [www.oxhilltours.com](http://www.oxhilltours.com).*