

# ***Moments in Leadership***

## **December 2014: Dealing With Difficult Subordinates**

One of the most challenging aspects of leadership is dealing with difficult subordinates – especially when you are a new leader dealing with a subordinate who is much older than you and thinks that they should have your job.

That is precisely the challenge that faced Union Brigadier General Irwin McDowell in July of 1861. A little background first. The American Civil War began in April of 1861 after the Confederate states fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. Following the fall of Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln called on the Northern states to raise 75,000 three-month volunteers to put down the rebellion. Most in both the North and South thought the war would not last more than three months – one big battle would decide the war.



Within weeks thousands of raw recruits began pouring into Washington, DC. To command the army forming around the capital, President Lincoln turned to Irwin McDowell – a 43-year old career Army Major who had spent most of his career behind a desk. But he was a favorite of General Winfield Scott, general-in-chief of all the Union armies. So McDowell, who had never commanded more than 50 men, now found himself promoted to Brigadier General and in command of an Army of more than 30,000 – larger than any field army in U.S. history at that time.

It was a daunting task.

Not only did McDowell had to see to the organization, training, outfitting and locating of these new troops, he also had to come up with a battle plan to defeat the Rebel army just across the Potomac River in

Northern Virginia. And he had to execute that plan before the enlistments of most of his soldiers expired in less than three months.

And he also had to acquaint himself with key subordinates – all of whom were selected by Lincoln and his cabinet – not McDowell.

One of those subordinates was the commander of the army's 1<sup>st</sup> division, Brigadier General Daniel Tyler. One of the first graduates of West Point in 1819, Tyler was 62 years old – almost 20 years older than McDowell. Tyler had spent much of his pre-war career as a successful businessman in Connecticut. Tyler was resentful that someone 19 years his junior had been appointed to the command of the army. Tyler thought he was eminently more qualified to command the army than McDowell and openly boasted to his staff that his division alone could whip the Rebel army.



While McDowell certainly had a lot on his plate, he should have handled Tyler with kid gloves. It is not known whether McDowell gave any thought to this delicate situation, but the obvious tension between McDowell and Tyler – and McDowell's inability to confront those tensions and deal with them in a productive manner – would have grave implications at the Battle of First Manassas.

On July 16, 1861 McDowell reluctantly moved his army out of its camps in and around the capital and into Northern Virginia. McDowell felt his troops were too inexperienced to fight a major battle, but their enlistments were almost up and President Lincoln was under enormous political pressure to move against the Rebel army which was sitting just a few miles from the Capital.

Once McDowell's army moved out, the Rebel army quickly retreated behind Bull Run creek just east of the critical railroad junction at Manassas. Bull Run could only be crossed at one bridge and several fords – all of which the Rebels now guarded.

On July 18, 1861 the leading elements of McDowell's army – Tyler's 1<sup>st</sup> division – reached Centreville, Virginia, a small village a few miles from Bull Run Creek. Tyler was under orders from McDowell to seize Centreville, keep watch for the enemy but not engage the enemy or give any hint as to which route the army would take in trying to cross Bull Run. McDowell's initial plan was to strike the Rebels at or near Blackburn's Ford – a crossing of the Bull Run and the most direct route to Manassas Junction. But McDowell wanted to keep the Rebels guessing as to where he would

cross. That's why he instructed Tyler not to bring on an engagement. The last thing McDowell wanted was to tip his hand and give the Rebels a chance to concentrate their forces.

But McDowell never communicated directly and in person with Tyler just how critical it was for Tyler to lay low. Perhaps it was because of the mutual dislike between McDowell and Tyler or because of the enormous responsibilities McDowell had on his shoulders - try going from managing 10 people to 35,000 and see how stressed you become! But whatever the reason, McDowell failed to communicate in person what he expected of Tyler.

And in keeping with Murphy's Law, Tyler did precisely what McDowell did NOT want him to do. On July 18<sup>th</sup> he sent one of his brigades on a reconnaissance towards Blackburn's Ford. A skirmish quickly became a pitched battle involving other elements of Tyler's division. By the end of the afternoon Tyler's forces had been driven back in disarray and confusion. Tyler had lost a total of 83 men killed, wounded or missing. Compared to the huge casualty rolls of future Civil War battles, it was a minor affair. But, at the time, it was considered a major clash and it shook many of the men in the army.

As important, Tyler's rash move infuriated McDowell and his staff. McDowell arrived at Centreville at the close of the affair. While, to his credit, McDowell did not openly confront Tyler, he made it clear through staff officers that he was very upset with Tyler. Not only did Tyler's setback at Blackburn's Ford force McDowell to draw up a new battle plan, it also - in McDowell's mind - demoralized the army to the point where he felt he could not ask certain units whose enlistments were expiring the next day to stay and fight.

McDowell was, however, able to adapt and did come up with a new battle plan. McDowell would fake a major attack on the Rebel center at Stone Bridge and take two divisions (some 13,000 men) on a wide flank march around the Rebel left. It was an excellent plan but unrealistic given the green nature of his army.

Under this new plan Tyler's division was given the job of approaching the Stone Bridge and creating the impression that the main Union attack was coming in that direction. In McDowell's mind, an aggressive show of force by Tyler around Stone Bridge would keep most of the Confederate units in that sector of the battlefield - giving McDowell time to move his flanking force around the Rebel left and into the Rebel rear. While McDowell briefed all of his subordinates on the evening of July 20<sup>th</sup>, he did not spend any extra time with his most difficult and troublesome subordinate - Tyler. And it was Tyler who was to play a critical role the next day. And it was Tyler who was still sulking over the fact that McDowell got mad at him over Blackburn's Ford; who felt that he should be commander of the army -- not McDowell; who felt that, if only given the chance, he could whip the Rebel army. McDowell either failed to recognize that Tyler's ego needed some soothing or recognized it but refused to address it because of

his contempt and dislike for Tyler.

Either way, the tension between McDowell and Tyler was a festering wound that would cripple the Union efforts the next day.

The Battle of First Manassas began in the early morning of July 21, 1861. The first shot was fired by a large artillery piece accompanying Tyler's division on the Warrenton Turnpike overlooking Stone Bridge.

Still sulking over his treatment by McDowell, Tyler did the bare minimum. His troops showed themselves in and around Stone Bridge, but no real effort was made to cross the bridge or any of the surrounding fords.



The Rebel commander at Stone Bridge soon realized that Tyler was not a threat. As such he left a skeleton force at the bridge and took the bulk of his brigade to head off the Union flanking force. Because of Tyler's inaction, other Rebel brigades were sent not to Stone Bridge but to engage the Union flanking force.

Instead of marching unopposed into the Rebel rear (which McDowell might have been able to do if Tyler had been more aggressive), McDowell's flanking force was confronted by several Rebel brigades which were able to slow down the advance long enough for Rebel reinforcements to arrive on Henry Hill where the Rebels would make their final stand.

The McDowell-Tyler dysfunction would manifest itself one more time at the Battle of First Manassas. By late morning Tyler's brigades finally crossed Bull Run and arrived at the foot of Henry Hill. Tyler declined to let McDowell know that his forces were on the field. Tyler had no knowledge of the Rebel position or the position of other Union forces. McDowell, however, did have a good idea of what was happening (as good as a commander could have on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century battlefield) and certainly would have appreciated knowing that Tyler's troops were on the field of battle!

As it turns out, Tyler's troops were in perfect position to outflank the Rebels on Henry Hill and get in the rear of the Rebel army. Tyler never realized what a perfect position he was in to turn the tide of battle, and McDowell never knew that Tyler's forces were on the field until it was too late to take advantage of their position. As it were, one of Tyler's brigades made a half-hearted assault on Henry Hill and was repulsed. Another made a series of uncoordinated attacks that failed.

In the end, as the Rebels poured more troops into the fight the Union army was forced to retreat. What at first started as an orderly retreat soon degenerated into a rout as the exhausted and green Union army began to panic as it tried desperately to cross back over Bull Run. Some Union troops did not stop retreating until they reached the streets of Washington, DC some 25 miles away. The Battle of First Manassas was a disastrous defeat for the Union and a sobering wake-up call to the nation that the Civil War would be a long and bloody struggle.

The Union defeat at First Manassas can be traced to a number of factors – one of those being the tension between McDowell and Tyler. At several points in the battle, Tyler's division could have dealt a decisive blow and turned the tide in favor of the Union. But it did not. Without question, the dysfunction of the relationship between McDowell and Tyler, and McDowell's failure to address this dysfunction played a critical role in the Union defeat.

In today's workplace young leaders still have to deal with older subordinates who may be bitter about being passed over and resentful over having to take orders from someone younger and less experienced. Leaders have to be aware of this dynamic. Open and honest communication is critical. Very often, having an older and experienced subordinate can be an asset to a young and new leader. Soliciting the advice of an older subordinate and making them feel valued and appreciated can go a long way in healing bruised egos. Leaders, at the very least, need to make this effort and they need to be aware of these dynamics when assessing their leadership team.

Failure to directly confront tension within a leadership team can lead to disastrous results, as Irwin McDowell found out to his dismay on the plains of Manassas on that fateful summer day in 1861. How might history have been changed had McDowell found a way to make peace with Tyler before the battle?

*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).*