

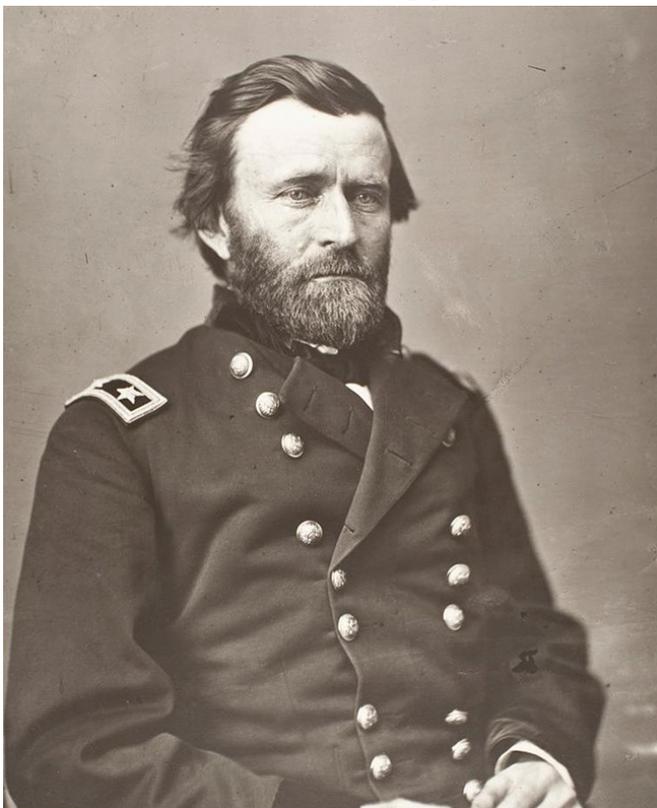
Moments in Leadership

September 2014: Doing Something Sets Direction and Purpose

In May of 1864 the American Civil War had been raging for more than three years. While the North had secured major victories in 1863 at Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Chattanooga, strong Rebel armies were in the field shielding the key cities of Atlanta, Georgia in the Western Theater and Richmond, Virginia in the Eastern Theater. Hundreds of thousands had already died and hundreds of thousands more had been horrifically wounded. The people of the north were becoming increasingly war-weary and a growing peace movement in the north threatened President Abraham Lincoln's re-election that fall.

Despite its defensive victory at Gettysburg in July of 1863, the Army of Potomac had a history of either losing to Robert E. Lee's army or not being able to deliver a knock out blow. The Army of Potomac had suffered humiliating defeats at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Those defeats had come to define the Army of the Potomac as an army that fought hard, but when the chips were down, could not defeat Robert E. Lee.

In March of 1864 Lincoln appointed his most successful general, Ulysses S. Grant, to be General-in-Chief of all the Union armies.



In the Army of the Potomac General Grant saw an organization filled with senior officers who were risk averse, intimidated by Lee and constantly looking over their shoulder at political oversight (namely the Joint Congressional Committee of the War. It had become an organization used to failure and defeat.

That is one of the reasons, I suspect, that Grant decided to accompany the

Army of the Potomac in its spring campaign against Lee's army – even though it put the Army's commander, General George Meade, in an awkward position.

In early May the Army of the Potomac, some 120,000 strong, was camped along the northern bank of the Rapidan River in Northern Virginia. The spring rains had finally stopped long enough for the dirt roads to dry and the Army of the Potomac was now poised to grapple yet again with its nemesis the Army of the Northern Virginia, which fielded some 65,000 battle-hardened troops.

On May 5th and 6th of 1864 the two armies fought in the dense thickets and woods known as the Wilderness. By the end of the second day of bloody combat the Army of the Potomac had lost close to 18,000 men killed, wounded or captured. The Confederates had lost some 8,000 men. No real ground had been gained and the two armies stood facing each other across a grotesque landscape littered with the detritus of battle and smoldering from scattered fires. Many of the wounded in no-man's land between the two opposing force were burned alive as their comrades watched helplessly. The soldiers of the Army of the Potomac had endured yet another blood bath and again had not been able to defeat Lee's veterans.

The evening of May 7th found the Army of the Potomac on the march. The head of the column reached a fork in the road. To the left lay the northern road to the fords over the Rapidan River and safety. Just a year earlier the army had fought a similar battle on this same terrain. At that time, just as it had done so many times over the past three years, the Army of the Potomac retreated over the river to lick its wounds and re-organize. Most of the men assumed that the army would again retreat given the horrific losses incurred during the past two days.

To the right lay the road to the south – the road to Spotsylvania Court House. If Grant's men could reach that crossroads village it could cut off Lee's army from Richmond and deal a knockout blow to Lee. The road to the south pointed the way to victory.

Grant himself sat on his horse at that crossroad. He quietly directed the army south – the road to victory. The evening of May 7th was a key turning point for the Army of the Potomac and the history of the United States. Ulysses S. Grant sent a powerful signal to his soldiers and officers that the days of retreating and defeatist thinking were over. The army would keep moving and keep fighting until victory was achieved and the Union restored.

Ulysses S. Grant had given the Army of the Potomac direction and purpose. And the men responded. Soldier after soldier recorded in diaries and letters home that their spirits immediately lifted that night once they realized that the army was not retreating. They knew that they finally had a leader who knew how to win and had

the guts and determination to achieve final victory.

The night of May 7, 1864 marked a turning point in the war. Grant saw the problem with the Army of the Potomac and he did something to try and fix it. While it would take Grant another 11 months to achieve final victory when Lee surrendered at Appomattox, the very act of Grant doing *something* positive gave the army direction, purpose, hope and confidence.

Think about your organization and the problems you and your team face. Instead of complaining about them and waiting for someone else to address them, stand up as a leader and do something clear and decisive to address the problem. More often than not, attempting to positively address and solve problems will give your team direction and purpose. It will likely raise morale. The problem may not immediately be solved, but the very act of doing *something* will send a powerful message to your team and, in the long run, put your team in a position to solve or overcome those problems.

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. Or visit our website at www.oxhilltours.com.