



Battlefield leadership: leadership lessons from Gettysburg

This past March, I attended a fantastic leadership development experience organized by a company called **Battlefield Leadership**. The organization offers numerous programs but this one was called the **Gettysburg Leadership Experience** and focused on exploring the leadership lessons on the historic battlefield grounds of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. Battlefield Leadership teaches “...experiential leadership training based in history.” The program is run by an impressive group of former military leaders, historians and business leadership experts and provides the participants with an immersive learning experience that takes place on the site of major military battles.

The program examined case studies from various leaders in both the Union and Confederate armies and distilled the cases into key learnings that could be directly applied to the workplace. The program was nothing short of spectacular. You do not need to be a history buff or a military expert to appreciate the fundamental lessons of courage, calm, communication, decision making [and much more] covered in these two days. I highly recommend Battlefield Leadership to anyone looking for a leadership experience that will crystallize what it means to be a leader by any definition of the word.

There were so many key take-aways from the program but I thought I would summarize three of my

favorite insights. Each centers around a leader and a case study we explored during the two days.

1. The location of a leader matters



So often, leaders are promoted into new positions and take on all new elevated responsibilities they did not have before. Through coaching, mentorship and experiences provided by those above them, they do their best to prepare for the new duties entrusted to them by their organizations. But it can often be a struggle to move beyond the behaviors and actions that got them to this new elevated position. After all, the environment changes around us all with every promotion, but often times, we do not appreciate the changes necessary to be successful at that new role. Instead, we return to what is familiar and *act a level down* because it is comfortable and we experienced success doing these things in the past.

On the field, we explored the case of [Major General John Reynolds](#) who commanded an infantry of 12,000 soldiers in the Union Army of the Potomac. Despite his immense responsibilities as a key leader of a major portion of the Union Army, General Reynolds was most comfortable at the front-lines leading his troops into battle. You could always find General Reynolds wherever you could hear the sound of the guns. He rode on horse-back head-long against the Confederate Army on day one [of three] in the battle of Gettysburg only to be promptly shot and killed by enemy gunfire.

What can we learn from this? I thought leaders set the example? I thought leaders got into the trenches with their troops and fought by their side?

All true to an extent, but I believe this story emphasizes the importance of the *location of a leader*. A leader must be where the key decisions are being made and his/her location must be an intentional

choice in the best interest of the group he/she is leading. Rather than making it a deliberate decision, Major General John Reynolds reverted back to the role that brought him success up until that point in his career. He did not adapt his leadership approach in light of his new responsibilities which resulted in his untimely demise on the battlefield. As leaders, we must always survey the landscape to make sure we are in the best location given our situation. Be it the board room, a meeting, in our office or with our team, the location of a leader must be an intentional decision rather than a force of habit or we risk getting shot trying to be a hero on the front lines.

2. Leaders are rarely given perfect conditions



“I need more resources!” is a common phrase in business today and while this is sometimes true, often we fail to recognize the resources we have at our disposal. We often encounter situations where we are say “...if I only had _____, I could be successful.” That blank could be money, people, tools, time, expertise, etc...it doesn’t matter. We often look for the perfect circumstances from which to launch our projects or key initiatives, but the fact is: the perfect circumstances rarely, if ever, exist.

We explored a number of cases at Gettysburg that highlight the impact that leaders can have with limited resources without the perfect conditions, but my favorite was [Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain](#). Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was a professor with no formal military training and commanded the 20th Maine Regiment of the Union Army. A few weeks prior to the Battle of Gettysburg, Colonel Chamberlain had been given a group of 150 mutineers from a sister regiment, the 2nd Maine, with the authorization to shoot those who did not do his duty to the Union Army. These 150 men had fought valiantly over the past

two years of the war but were tired, hungry, ill and homesick. The men refused to fight and demanded that the Union Army release them from their remaining year of service in the army to which they had agreed. Colonel Chamberlain was given these resources and told to make his way to Gettysburg.

Chamberlain listened to their grievances and extended his aid to the new soldiers. In a brilliant display of leadership, Colonel Chamberlain conveyed his intent, explained the task at hand and gave his men a unity of purpose. Though his resources were not perfect, the timing of the upcoming battle was poor, and their spirits were down, he harnessed the strengths that these new soldiers could bring to his regiment. [Click here](#) to watch Jeff Daniels' speech addressing the 2nd Maine in the movie Gettysburg.

Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's combined regiment of the 2nd and 20th Maine became the heroes of the **Battle of Little Round Top**. This was a pivotal moment in the battle of Gettysburg as Little Round Top represented the very edge of the Union line. If the line at Little Round Top broke and the 20th Maine could not defend its position, the Confederate Army would flank around the Union line and move in on them from a position of strength. Chamberlain and his men defended their position on Little Round Top and were heralded as heroes despite imperfect resources and less than ideal conditions.

This particular lesson is critical as we all can often become lulled into paralysis if we are not given the perfect set of circumstances in which to operate. Joshua Chamberlain is a wonderful example of using a honed set leadership traits – listening, vision, conveying purpose, inspiration, and so much more – to optimize the resources he has on hand. Simply stated: leadership is not about the availability of resources or perfection of one's conditions, it's about what you *do* with the resources on-hand.

3. Better ground is not always better ground



Perhaps my favorite example of leadership, or lack thereof, comes with the case of **Major General Daniel Sickles** that took place on the afternoon of July 2, 1863, day two of the Battle. We encounter many people in our organizations who are viewed *mavericks* – those who innovate, understand the organization and lead the organization into a new realm of uncharted territory. They are your innovators, visionaries, or futurists who consistently ask “what can I do to improve *our* current position?” Mavericks often use unconventional means and methods and are extremely valuable and necessary to any organization.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have the *renegades*. Renegades may use the same means and methods as the mavericks but they ask a different question: “what can I do to improve what *my* current position?” The difference is subtle but important: *our* vs *my*. Renegades’ selfish motivations drive a different set of behaviors in their own selfish best interest versus the interest of the organization as a whole.

Major General Daniel Sickles had been given orders by **General George Meade** through **General Henry Jackson Hunt** to defend a key position in the Union Army line so as to prevent an attack in a key location held by the Union. Major General Sickles surveyed the terrain and determined he did not like the ground he was given and decided to move his men forward so that they may possess the higher ground. Violating direct orders from General Hunt, Sickles advanced his own cause of a safer, more ideal position for his corp while at the same time weakening the Union’s line and leaving a key flank exposed.

So, did Sickles know better than General Meade and General Hunt? Was he smarter than his command? Was he a visionary and acted while those around him failed to see what he saw? No. Sickles was a renegade and advanced his troops forward in his own selfish interest.

We see cases like this all the time where colleagues or co-workers put their own interests ahead of the organization to the detriment of the organization. It is natural and expected that we put our interests high on our priority list, but not to the detriment of the organizations for whom we work. The key difference between mavericks and renegades comes down to concern for the “we” (mavericks) versus “me” (renegades).

So, how much of this behavior from renegades outside the norm do you tolerate? When do you take action? After all, renegades exist within our ranks. It is a fact of reality that they are, and will forever be, a part of all organizations. I believe the answer may be: when their behavior begins to permeate the culture, you must act. Here is my litmus test as to when leaders must take action on renegade behavior:

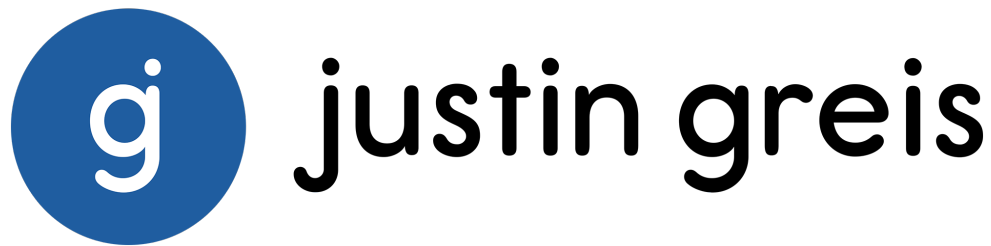
1. When you suspect that the bad behavior is becoming the norm.
2. When the behavior has a negative impact on others.

Heck, I don't care if renegades go into self-destruct mode and only impact themselves; it's when their behavior starts to impact others such that it is accepted, tolerated and excused as normal that a leader must take action. As [Richard Thomas](#) explained: “One of the most sacred responsibilities of a leader is *keeping the culture*.” And sometimes, as was likely the case with Dan Sickles, a cultural intervention is necessary (even if it comes in the form of friendly fire).

The lessons continue

The Battlefield Leadership experience was powerful and profound and its lessons are too numerous to be summed up in one blog post alone. My intent is to share a few take-aways that resonated with me. I encourage you to learn more about Battlefield Leadership and reach out to them to incorporate it into your own training, leadership and development programs. History is filled with such wonderful lessons and stories but it takes a trained team to bring those lessons to life in a way this is meaningful and relevant to each of us.

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