

Valuable lessons in leadership

Leadership training companies use the Battle of Gettysburg to illustrate how modern heads of business, government and other organizations can lead more effectively in trying times. They highlight moments and places on the battlefield to make their points, some well-known, some more obscure.

Here are three examples:



BENJAMIN WILLIAMSON, BRUNSWICK DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION

A statue of Col. Joshua Chamberlain graces the campus of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Chamberlain was a graduate of Bowdoin College and a professor there.

Trust your instincts

■ Union Brig. Gen. George Greene's decision to defy superiors, trust his civil engineering instincts, his experience (at 62, he was one of the oldest fighters on the battlefield that day), to massively fortify Culp's Hill, near the right flank of the Union lines, is used to illustrate how trusting one's instincts and experience pays off.

After higher-ranking officers had pulled all but about 1,500 men off Culp's Hill to fortify the left of the Union line and had not seen the threat as seriously as Greene did, Greene had his men work non-stop to cut down trees and build zig-zag fortifications that helped the Yankees hold the hill for 36 hours against far superior Confederate numbers. Historians such as Garry Adelman of the Civil War Trust say the Union's sturdiness on Culp's Hill was as important as Col. Joshua Chamberlain's actions on Little Round Top.

The Baltimore Pike was just over Culp's Hill from the attacking Confederates, and had Greene's unit been overrun, Union supply trains could have been captured or destroyed and the Yankees could have been routed from the rear. "You have a planner, a guy who hits with the tough truth," Antigoni Ladd, academic director of Tigrett, a Gettysburg-based leadership training company, said of Greene.

Take bold action

■ Confederate Brig. Gen. Edward Porter Alexander's actions on July 3, just before the famous and ill-fated "Pickett's Charge" up Cemetery Ridge, are used to illustrate how bold action can overcome limited resources. Tasked with softening the Union line before Pickett's Charge, the artillery commander Alexander knew his available cannons were inadequate. Without orders, he went to other units on other parts of the battlefield and pulled rank, demanding to take control of batteries, Ladd said. Although a lot of the Confederate fire was ineffective because of inferior technology, "some of his cannons do very well," she said, making it possible for Confederate infantry to come close to breaking through and changing the course of the war — and history.

Don't gloss over challenges

■ The most well-known is Col. Joshua Chamberlain, the former college professor who commanded the 20th Maine, which held the left flank of the Union left at Little Round Top. Col. Chamberlain's depleted unit of about 300 men held off waves of Confederate attacks up a rocky, tree-covered hill.

Chamberlain's unit was augmented at the last minute by about 120 fellow Maine soldiers from another unit who had been detained for desertion over a dispute on their enlistment papers. On the march to Gettysburg they had been put under Chamberlain's guard, and he had permission to shoot them, if necessary. Eventually, Chamberlain — who would become governor of Maine after the war — talked all but four of the fellow Maine natives into helping defend the line on July 2, the second day of the battle. He fed them, told them the precarious position the army was in, and convinced them they would be of great value if they joined the line. Those extra troops were instrumental in the Union's ability to hold its left flank and prevent the Confederates from routing from the Yankees from the flank and rear.

"He took disgruntled, disengaged employees and turned them around," said Steve Wiley, whose Lincoln Leadership Institute, based in Gettysburg, holds seminars on the battlefield for leaders of Fortune 500 companies and others. "He showed that he valued them, brought them into a plan, he took care of their needs."

Antigoni Ladd, academic director of Tigrett, another Gettysburg-based leadership training company, said she uses Chamberlain to illustrate how the best leaders, even in the most stressful times, do best by showing what is at stake and not glossing over challenges.

"Managers and leaders today are so stressed they often have lost the focus of their purpose. They spend all their time putting out fires and dealing with the task at hand," she said. "We try to convince them that periodically you have to step back and say to your people, 'Here is why we are doing this job.' You have to remind them of the purpose of the organization, and then you have to say, 'I need you.' Which is precisely what Chamberlain did."