

The top three leadership lessons from the battle of Gettysburg

At the 150th anniversary of America's bloodiest civil war battle, here's what military and civilian leaders should remember



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Jeff Daniels, standing at centre, portrays Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain in the 1993 film *Gettysburg*. Photograph: Allstar/Cinetext Collection/Sportsphoto/Allstar/Cinetext Collection

The United States has fought many battles in its history. During two battles, however, the fate of the entire nation hung in the balance. The first was Yorktown where the combined forces of George Washington's Continental army and a French fleet defeated the British army and forced its surrender. If Washington had lost at Yorktown, the American war for independence might well have failed. The second was at Gettysburg during the American civil war.

For three days, 1-3 July 1863, the future of the US as one nation was in jeopardy. A Confederate victory could have resulted in recognition of the south as an independent state by several European powers, and Abraham Lincoln would likely have lost the

election in 1864.

This week marks the [150th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg](#). We have an opportunity to reflect on many important leadership lessons that are as relevant today as they were in 1863. Let's consider three:

1. The importance of time and timing

When a leader makes a decision for his/her organization, timing may actually be more important than the decision taken. The battle of Gettysburg occurs largely because a Union cavalry commander, John Buford, recognizes the critical importance of the town's crossroads. As a result, he positions his troopers on the best terrain west of the city, resulting in the initial fighting on 1 July.

Today, we often believe that leaders are better equipped to make decisions based on a plethora of available technological devices (cellphones, iPads, computers, etc) and data. But if leaders today are not careful these very devices can rob their organizations of initiative. Buford made a decision for the entire Union army. If he had had a cellphone he might well have called his boss to ask his opinion, left a voicemail, sent a text, etc and then waited for a reply before acting thus wasting precious time.

2. Effective leaders must "park" their personal ego and focus on what is best for their organization

Jim Collins, author of [Good to Great](#), argues his research of the best modern companies demonstrates that so-called "Level 5 leaders" who make decisions solely based on what is best for their organizations are the most successful. Robert E Lee arrived at Gettysburg following a string of victories at Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg. Consequently, some civil war historians have suggested that Lee, despite his brilliance as a tactician, may have suffered from hubris. He appears to have believed that he and his army of Northern Virginia could not be defeated. As a result he orders the now famous "[Pickett's Charge](#)" on the third day, which resulted in disaster.

3. An effective leader must articulate and communicate a strategic vision to his/her organization

The full story of Gettysburg encompasses both the battle and the Gettysburg Address delivered by President Lincoln on 19 November 1863. This iconic speech of less than

300 words described a clear vision for the nation's future – "a new birth of freedom". It followed naturally from his first inaugural address that focused on preserving the Union, and the Emancipation Proclamation which freed slaves in the "states under rebellion" but did not end slavery as an institution.

Lincoln would continue to communicate his vision for the nation to the end. At his urging, the US Congress passed the 13th Amendment ending slavery in America in January 1865. On 4 March, Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term. During his brief remarks (only slightly over 700 words) he described a vision of reconciliation: "With malice towards none, with charity towards all." He later provided guidance to his Generals Ulysses S Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman that they should let them up easy when dealing with the impending surrender of Confederate troops.

On 10 April, there were celebrations throughout Washington following the announcement that Robert E Lee had surrendered. Lincoln addressed a crowd outside the White House that evening, and his final speech argued that former slaves who had fought for the Union should receive full citizenship including the right to vote. One of the onlookers was John Wilkes Booth, a relatively famous actor. On 14 April, Booth shot Lincoln during a play at Fords Theater. The president would die the next day – Good Friday. Sadly, the vision he articulated would not be realized for over a century.

Leadership is clearly an art and not a science, and we can learn much from the past. As we prepare for the future, leadership is as critical to any organization today as it was during a few days 1863.



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