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IF HISTORY CAN TEACH US ANYTHING... IT'S HOW TO LEAD

By Eric Whitley Productivity, Inc.

Q. What key activity continues to be undervalued when implementing improvement efforts?

A. Leadership.

Generally, organizations introduce lean and continuous improvement initiatives with a somewhat clear understanding of the technical side of the equation, but the actions needed to sustainably lead the effort are consistently overlooked as a vital part of the plan.

The role of leadership in that plan is really nothing new; examples are everywhere. Some fundamental lessons can be found in history. Five foundational ones emerge from stories of leadership during key battles in two different American wars. And they all point to daily leadership behaviors that build the capability to move an organization over time, especially during adversity.

LEADERS MUST BE VISIBLE

Those we lead are looking forward for their leaders, not backward.
A true leader cannot lead from behind.

In December 1776, General George Washington found himself and the Continental Army positioned in Pennsylvania, across the Delaware River from a garrison of Hessians (German mercenaries hired by the British) who were encamped in the town of Trenton, New Jersey.

Having suffered losses due to sickness, desertion, and lapsing enlistments and in need of warm clothing and food, Washington's army had fallen into a weakened state. Morale was extremely low. Writing to his brother about the sad state of affairs, Washington said, "I think the game is pretty near up." He realized that he had to make a dramatic move to boost morale and to change the tide of the Revolutionary War or it would surely be "a noble cause lost."

Washington devised a plan for his troops to cross the nearly frozen Delaware River in the middle of the night, advance under cover of darkness, and rout the Hessians out of Trenton. On December 25, Washington made preparations. Meeting with his commanders, he handed each a piece of white paper about the size of a business card and ordered them to place it in the back of their hats so that, in the dim morning light, the troops could discern their officers during the battle. With this one simple action, Washington teaches us one of the golden rules of leadership: Leadership must come from the front, not from behind.

In his book 1776, David McCullough quotes a young fifer named John Greenwood who wrote, "I never heard soldiers say anything, nor ever saw them trouble themselves, as to where they were or where they were led. It was enough for them to know that whatever the officers command they must go ... for it was all the same owing to the impossibility of being in a worse condition than their present one, and therefore the men always liked to be kept moving in expectation of bettering themselves." Those we lead are looking forward for their leaders, not backward.

A true leader cannot lead from behind. Merely stating that you "support" a person, program, or cause and then expecting results is a disservice to your role as a leader and to those you lead.

In the Battle of Trenton, Washington found the need for leadership so important that for the first time he joined his troops on the march and was heard to yell, "For God's sake, keep with your officers!"

GET OUT AHEAD OF PROBLEMS

Washington implemented a simple system and protocol to solve the problem he'd anticipated.

We learn another key principle from Washington's actions: Leadership means anticipating, identifying, and solving the systemic problems encountered by those you lead. By having each officer place that small piece of paper in his hat, Washington implemented a simple system and protocol to solve the problem he'd anticipated—the ability of his troops to see their leaders in the early morning light. In fact, the practice of adding white stripes on the rear of hats, and eventually helmets, during combat became a standard that was used through World War II.

LEADERSHIP IS ALWAYS ON DISPLAY

If you are a reactive leader and allow daily occurrences to dictate your priorities, your organization will take on your reactive traits.

Leaders must understand that in every circumstance their leadership is on display.

When teaching this principle I use one simple scenario: Imagine that you and a subordinate are walking toward each other in a hallway and you decide to keep your head down and not make eye contact as you pass.

Now envision yourself in the same situation making eye contact, asking how their day is going, and perhaps even inquiring about their family. Which one of these scenarios would best inspire your subordinate to be working on the business instead of just in the business?

If you are a reactive leader and allow daily occurrences to dictate your priorities, your organization will take on your reactive traits. If instead you refuse to allow the "fires" in a reactive culture to control your priorities, and stay visibly focused on what is important for the future of the business, your organization will also take on that character.

TRUST IS EARNED DAILY, NOT JUST IN A CRISIS.

...the most impressive point is the legacy of the leadership Chamberlain displayed.

We see another great leadership example from the battlefield at Gettysburg during the American Civil War.

In May 1863, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, the commanding officer of the Union Army's 20th Maine Infantry, received 120 disgruntled soldiers, the remnants of the 2nd Maine Infantry. These men had signed three-year enlistment papers in a two-year regiment and were being forced to stay and fight. The existing orders were that, if Chamberlain felt it necessary, he could punish these soldiers using methods that included execution. Knowing full well that he could not shoot his fellow soldiers, Chamberlain took another approach.

Pulling the 120 men aside, Chamberlain reviewed the situation in which both he and the men found themselves. Although Chamberlain's words to his new troops were not documented, we know that they hit the mark. Over the following days all but 6 of the 120 decided to join the 20th Maine.

On July 3, 1863 the men of the 20th Maine (including those from the 2nd Maine), were positioned at the extreme left of the Union lines in a small Pennsylvania town known as Gettysburg. With strict orders to hold the end of the line, the regiment stared down the side of a small rocky hill called Little Round Top toward the Confederate Army and the 15th and 47th Alabama positioned below

Throughout the day the battle for Little Round Top raged with charge after charge from the Confederate soldiers. With ammunition running low, the men tired, and the lines depleted, Chamberlain ordered that a portion of the line break from formation and move farther to the left to provide additional cover there.

When they were out of ammunition, Chamberlain issued an order with a single word: "Bayonets!" Knowing exactly what this meant, his men fixed their bayonets and prepared for the charge. In what is recorded as the fifth or sixth attack of the Alabama regiments, Chamberlain ordered that the Maine regiment charge down the hill in a right-wheel formation. They swept the Alabamians down the hill and away from the end of the Union line.

...trust was not earned on Little Round Top that day, but through his actions before that moment of intense adversity...

Knowing what to do and when to do it on a tactical level is a skill that all leaders must learn and exercise on a regular basis. In this case though, the most impressive point is the legacy of the leadership Chamberlain displayed.

The tactic of detaching a portion of the line to the left, and thereby intentionally creating a hole in the line, was a high-risk maneuver that required Chamberlain to hold the complete trust of his men. That trust was not earned on Little Round Top that day, but through his actions before that moment of intense adversity, including the way in which he had persuaded the men of the 2nd Maine to join his regiment.

If good leadership can motivate people to charge the enemy in this type of circumstance, then surely good leadership can motivate individuals to do organizational tasks such as following work standards.

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

Keep in mind five key takeaways from these examples, and consider how you might change your leadership behaviors to effect sustainable change:

- All organizational problems are ultimately leadership problems.
- Leaders lead from the front, not from the rear.
- Leadership means anticipating, identifying, and solving the systemic problems encountered by those you lead.
- Your leadership is always on display.
- Trust must be earned through daily actions over time, not just in moments of crisis.

Eric Whitley, management consultant with Productivity Inc., has more than 20 years experience working with companies such as Autoliv ASP, Morton Thiokol and McDonnell Douglas to help them achieve their continuous improvement goals.

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NORTH AMERICA & ASIA **PRODUCTIVITY INC.**

375 Bridgeport Avenue, 3rd Floor
 Shelton, CT 06484
 Phone: (203) 225-0451 / (800) 966-5423

Register online: www.productivityinc.com
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