



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Ulysses S. Grant and the convenience store manager

The year was 1864, and President Lincoln faced the sobering reality that the Union army needed new generalship. To date, the leadership of the military had produced few victories, and the assumption of a quick and decisive end to Southern succession had proven painfully incorrect.

General McClelland, while popular with the rank and file, was indecisive and overly cautious. His approach was typically to develop a complicated plan from a headquarters rather distant from the field of battle and then realize that he needed significantly more resources to assure its success. As a result the progress of the army could best be characterized as “one step forward and two steps back.”

Lincoln knew that he must find a leader who could deliver results or he would be forced to negotiate a truce that would leave the Union divided. He found the solution in a commander from the western theatre of the war — the gruff, disheveled and relentless Ulysses S. Grant.

Biographer Michael Korda wrote, “Grant had an extreme, almost phobic dislike of turning back and retracing his steps. If he set out for somewhere, he would get there somehow, whatever the difficulties that lay in his way. This idiosyncrasy would turn out to be one of the factors that made him such a formidable general. Grant would always, always press on — turning back was not an option for him.”

Jean Edward Smith wrote, “The genius of Grant’s command style lay in its simplicity. Grant never burdened his division commanders with excessive detail. Grant recognized the battlefield was in flux. By not specifying movements in detail, he left his subordinate commanders free to exploit whatever opportunities developed.”

Grant would later state that “the art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can, strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on. The only way to whip an army is to go out and fight it.”



But a characteristic of Grant’s that best defined his generalship was his sense of compassion and humanity. The diary of a Confederate soldier tells of Grant’s actions following the surrender at Appomattox:

“The [Union senior] officers rode past the Confederates smugly without any sign of recognition except by one. When General Grant reached the line of ragged, filthy, bloody, despairing prisoners strung out on each side of the bridge, he lifted his hat and held it over his head until he passed the last man of that living funeral cortege. He was the only officer in that whole train that recognized us as being on the face of the earth.”

Neither Grant nor Lincoln were perfect leaders, but in a time of chaos and uncertainty they were ultimately successful because they had a clear understanding of the mission, gave authority to their subordinates to achieve the mission amidst the changing conditions of the battlefield, and they were completely committed to the attainment of their ultimate goal — reuniting our nation.

Why can’t we find leaders who share their values some 150 years later?

Found leadership

I was bemoaning the lack of leadership at almost every level of American life as I pulled into the gasoline pumps at a convenience store on a cold, windy January morning. I was met by a young man in his late 20s wearing a white shirt, tie and a windbreaker who politely informed me that the credit card readers at the pumps were not working but that they would be able to complete the transaction inside the store. He let me know that the I.T. department at the headquarters was working on the problem

as he washed the windows on my truck and apologized for the inconvenience. As he turned away, his coat opened to reveal a nametag that identified him as the manager.

When I got into the store, the clerk politely informed me that the cup of coffee would be free and she apologized again for any inconvenience before thanking me for my business. The staff at that convenience store refused to let a technical glitch get in the way of taking care of their customers. Instead they took action and overcame the unexpected not with a grand costly strategy but with tenacity, a relentless commitment to connect with their customers, and small acts of kindness and service.

As I drove away, the manager was still working in the cold, communicating with customers, washing windshields and all the while maintaining a smile on his face. As a result, I felt fortunate to have experienced wonderful service as opposed to being aggravated by the inconvenience of not being able to pay at the pump.

Then it struck me that I had just witnessed the very kind of leadership that we desperately need in our society. It was good to know that the spirit of leadership is still alive and well if only we have the courage to hold ourselves accountable while maintaining the ingenuity and creativity to remain steadfast even when conditions are imperfect.

It’s worth asking ourselves, and each other, “What kind of General are you?” Hopefully we have a bit of Grant and the convenience store manager in each of us.

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