

Leadership Lessons from a Civil War Colonel

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was 34 years old when he left a prestigious and safe professorship at Bowdoin College in Brunswick Maine in 1862. Chamberlain was married with five young children. He earned two university degrees, one from Bowdoin and a graduate theology degree from Bangor Theological Seminary. Chamberlain spoke six languages and taught college philosophy. He was passionate about the ever-expanding United States of America and was moved to action when he learned of the secession of the Confederate States.

Though he lacked a military education and background, Chamberlain left Bowdoin to join the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment, which was about to depart for Washington to join the Army of the Potomac in the War Between the States. Initially he was assigned the rank of Colonel, but cognizant of his lack of experience, he asked to start as a Lieutenant Colonel. Within months, his brigade fought in some of the bloodiest battles in the Civil War, including those in Antietam and Fredericksburg. But it was at Gettysburg, the high-water mark of the war, that now Colonel Chamberlain met his greatest challenge.

Many recall Col. Chamberlain as he was portrayed by Jeff Bridges in the movie, "Gettysburg". In one scene, Chamberlain was presented with a large group of rag-tag and worn-out soldiers from the former 2nd Maine, which was mustered out months before. The soldiers refused to fight, were arrested and charged with mutiny. Chamberlain was instructed to deal with the mutinous men as he saw fit. The penalty for mutiny was execution. Chamberlain, reluctant to shoot the men, gave a moving speech, calling on their shared belief in freedom, shared values of selflessness and shared experience of courage in the face of likely death. In the end, he gave them a choice to fight or stay behind. All but a few picked up their arms and fought alongside the 20th Maine.

The fight at Gettysburg was the last obstacle for General Lee as he marched to Washington. Convinced that if he could approach Washington from the north, he could overtake the Capitol and conclude the war, thus cementing the formation of a new country, the Confederate States of America. Chamberlain's 20th Maine was charged with holding the left flank of the mile-long line of Union soldiers on a hot July day in a farm field just outside of the small town. Chamberlain and his men successfully defended a hill called "Little Round Top" that overlooked what is now called "Devil's Den" in one of the most intense battles of the war. The fight at Little Round Top was pivotal. Had Chamberlain failed, many believe the outcome of the war and the fate of the nation would have been very different.

Law firm leaders can learn a lot from Col. Chamberlain. When he looked in the mirror, Chamberlain saw himself first as a leader. He could have identified primarily as a professor, academic, language whiz-kid, or even a father and husband. Instead, he risked those roles that were most comfortable and safe for that of Leader, focused on preserving the integrity of the union.

Like Chamberlain, many lawyers and staff in leadership roles have no formal training in management and leadership. Still, we're called upon to lead people through challenging times of change. We need to identify ourselves primarily as leaders, focused on the leadership roles and opportunities at our firms. Too often we get caught up with 'administrivial' tasks, aimed at preserving the status quo. Short tenures of managing partners, practice group leaders and marketing staff make it difficult to affect lasting change. The matrix/non-hierarchical structure of most law firms makes it easy for people avoid being a leader – attorneys are incented to bill hours and please clients; staffs are rewarded for quality and production (but not leadership). Leadership is risky business, but positive change doesn't happen without leadership. Leadership doesn't happen unless people look in the mirror and first see themselves as a change-agent, a motivating force, an influencer – a leader.

Management guru Peter Drucker once said, "Only three things happen naturally in organizations: friction, confusion and underperformance. Everything else requires leadership." Chamberlain 'walked the talk'. He modeled the way. He was not a career officer like Grant, Meade or McClellan. He did not graduate from West Point or Annapolis. He led alongside his troops, not from behind. Law firm leaders are most effective when they set the example, are inclusive of different levels of attorneys and staff, and focused on creating a team esprit-de-corps to effectively serve clients. This is especially true when considering how to engage "Gen-Y" workers. Like Chamberlain, we need to find our 'leadership voice' that aligns our values with our actions.

Chamberlain, as seen in his plea to the mutinous men of the 2nd Maine, was skilled at enlisting others in a common vision. Like a litigator, he used his gift of oration to communicate his deep understanding of and empathy with his follower's situation. He laid out a clear, compelling and challenging vision – hold the line and preserve the Union. And he affirmed shared values of freedom, selflessness and courage.

Law firm leaders need to practice the same skill of enlisting others in a common vision using understanding, empathy and affirming shared values if they hope to change unproductive elements of firm culture and individual behavior. Engaging others to follow a common vision in a law firm often resembles negotiation. It requires an exchange of ideas; a give-and-take dialogue that often reshapes the vision and direction. Understanding other's interests (sometimes called WIIFM - What's In It For Me) before the dialogue is critical. Engaging others is best done one-on-one, not in large groups. The goal is to align interests so that the follower believes it is in her/his best interest to support the vision.

Affirming shared values and experiences provides a platform for discussing a vision for the future. Chamberlain's leadership did not go unnoticed. At the end of the War, General Grant rewarded Chamberlain with the honor of accepting the formal surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia outside the court house in Appomattox, Virginia. The National Parks Service describes the event:

"It was a cool, wet day. Their lines formed on the road leading to Appomattox Court House, Chamberlain's division watched the tattered gray column trudge toward the village. Without hesitation, Chamberlain called his men to attention and saluted the Confederates as they approached. At the head of the Confederate column a despondent General John Gordon heard the shifting of weapons and recognized the honor. He rose in his saddle, reigned in his horse and boldly returned the salute. Former enemies paid their respects to each other in this last act of the war in Virginia."

Chamberlain, upon return to Brunswick, was nominated and elected Governor of Maine. Following his term he served as President of Bowdoin College for many years.

Mark Beese is President of Leadership for Lawyers, LLC, a consultancy that helps lawyers in the areas of business development, marketing and leadership development. www.leadershipforlawyers.com