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Leadership Spotlight

Leadership Tunnel Vision

In the sweltering heat of a July summer, a general leading 70,000 men stands alone with the weight of a newly formed nation's future upon his shoulders. This brilliant military mind ponders the terrain before him. His desire, his vision, is to decisively end a war that has claimed over 600,000 lives. This general observes, in the distance, enemy troops who occupy the high ground with a phalanx of cannons, muskets, and men at the ready. Suddenly, one of his most trusted and experienced subordinates breaks the solitary moment and advises a strategy contradicting the firm plans of the general, who angrily responds, "If the enemy is there, we must attack him."¹ The general of this determined army, thus, ignores the sage recommendation of his confidant and commits his already limited resources to one of the worst wartime defeats in American history. Rather than obtaining his desired vision, General Robert E. Lee secured the eventual defeat of the Confederate South at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Lee was guilty of leadership tunnel vision (LTV), what leaders often fall victim to when a vision is so important, overwhelming, or compelling that they neither can hear, see, nor comprehend anything beyond that goal. This phenomenon is similar to being in a shooting situation. You cannot hear or see anything other than the threat before you. The difference between these two phenomena is that one is involuntary; the other, voluntary.

We, as leaders, may receive warnings from colleagues who share the same vision, yet we only commit precious resources and manpower to an ultimate defeat of that goal. After a 3-day battle, Lee lost almost half of his men and, ultimately, the war, which lasted another 21 months after the Battle of Gettysburg ended. The most notable fact about Lee's LTV was that his

men believed in the same vision. Moreover, a lone voice, General James Longstreet, provided an alternative to help achieve a shared goal, an alternative that most military historians agree would have forced the North to sue for peace. Lee, with LTV, would not hear of it.

Pickett's Charge, alone, resulted in the loss of 90 percent of Lee's infantry. Immediately afterward, Lee dismounted his horse, ran onto the battlefield to meet his walking wounded, and exclaimed, "It is all my fault."² The graveyard of history is littered with the disastrous failures of generals, politicians, and captains of industry whose previous successes became erased by their refusal to listen and to heed current situations.

Many firearms instructors train officers to deal with involuntary tunnel vision by breaking contact with a target after eliminating the threat and scanning to their left and right to reengage their senses for other threats. As leaders, we must use a derivative of this method when attempting to conduct institutional change or strategic planning.

The Harvard Business Review published a salient article entitled "How to Make High-Stakes Decisions."³ This article featured a review of the book *Think Again: Why Good Leaders Make Bad Decisions and How to Keep It From Happening to You*, which offers some key considerations in high-stakes decision making.⁴

Do:

- Own the decision, but bring in others to better understand the various issues involved.
- Recognize when you may be partial, and ask a trusted peer to check your bias.
- Regularly revisit decisions you have made to ensure they remain valid.

Do Not:

- Assume the issue is exactly like one you have handled in the past. Rather, look for similarities and differences.
- Rely exclusively on your instinct. Instead, think through any initial reactions you have.
- Ignore new information, especially if it challenges your current viewpoint.

If you are a leader in the process of making a high-stakes decision, adhering to these key points may reduce the same LTV that sealed Lee's strategic demise. If knowledgeable persons suggest alternatives to achieving your vision, do not dismiss them as the proverbial "naysayers." Instead, view them as possible means of changing course toward a common goal, thus avoiding the waste of limited resources and possible defeat. Break contact with your vision from time to time to listen to the sage advice of colleagues on your left and right. Ask the tough questions: "Is this working?" or "Any better ideas?" Lee probably wished he had. ♦

Endnotes

¹ http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Robert_E_Lee/FREREL/3/6*.html (accessed October 3, 2011).

² <http://www.historyplace.com/civilwar/battle.htm> (accessed October 3, 2011).

³ Amy Gallow, "How to Make a High-Stakes Decision," *Harvard Business Review*, <http://blogs.hbr.org/hmu/2011/05/how-to-make-a-high-stakes-deci.html> (accessed October 3, 2011).

⁴ Andrew Campbell, Jo Whitehead, and Sydney Finkelstein, *Think Again: Why Good Leaders Make Bad Decisions and How to Keep It from Happening to You* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008).

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