

# Battle-Hardened Leadership Lessons from Gettysburg

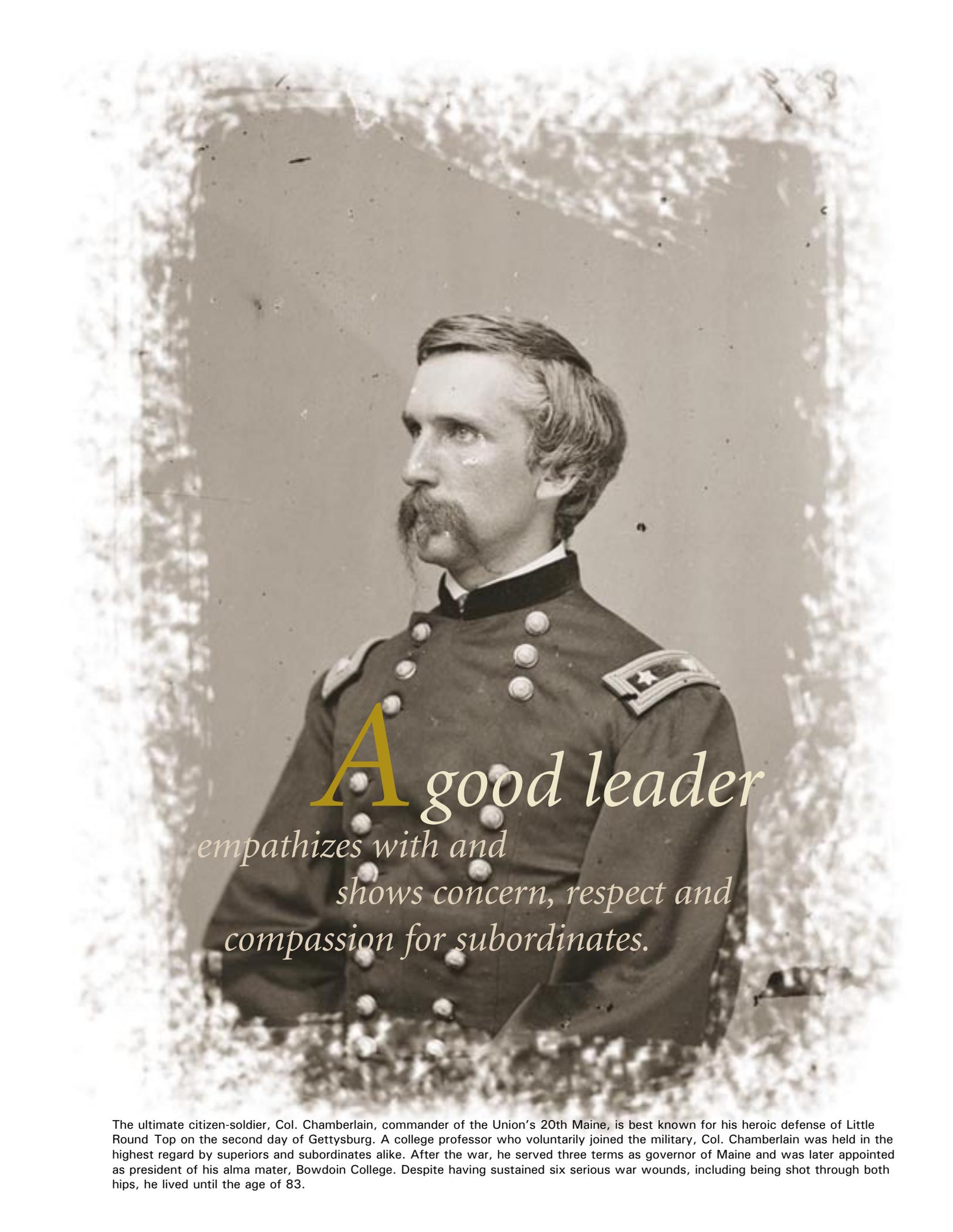


by Mr. Tom Gelli, Chief, Congressional Affairs, DCMA Headquarters

*They came from the north and south and from the east and west. They were of diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds, arriving by various modes of transportation and converging on the Southern Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. There, over the course of three days, they would toil well beyond dusk under ever-changing conditions to ensure the vitality and well-being of the greater enterprise.*



Braving the inclement weather, a group of conference attendees listens as a Gettysburg historian recounts the events that unfolded on that spot in July 1863.



*A good leader  
empathizes with and  
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compassion for subordinates.*

The ultimate citizen-soldier, Col. Chamberlain, commander of the Union's 20th Maine, is best known for his heroic defense of Little Round Top on the second day of Gettysburg. A college professor who voluntarily joined the military, Col. Chamberlain was held in the highest regard by superiors and subordinates alike. After the war, he served three terms as governor of Maine and was later appointed as president of his alma mater, Bowdoin College. Despite having sustained six serious war wounds, including being shot through both hips, he lived until the age of 83.

**B**ut unlike their predecessors of 141 years ago, these wayfarers were equipped not with muskets and canteens but with laptops and spiral binders. Dramatically fewer in number than the 165,000 soldiers who hallowed that rolling terrain in the summer of 1863, these modern-day conscripts, even at full muster, numbered scarcely more than a company of 150. And in contrast to the blue and gray of their Civil War forebears, this 21st century assemblage was clad, at least figuratively speaking, in DCMA purple. Yet they too had their objectives — learning objectives, that is — and they were resolute in their pursuit of them.

They had come not to fight but to study and to return home with the spoils of learning —booty that would enable them to lead their colleagues and work units by applying principles gleaned from the fame and the shame earned at the Battle of Gettysburg — the bloodiest battle ever in North America.

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The three-day program, sponsored by the DCMA Transformation Team, spotlighted some of the leadership lessons provided by the Battle of Gettysburg. Indeed some things long endure, and, as Mrs. Sallie Flavin, DCMA deputy director, noted in her keynote address, principles of effective leadership are not muted by the march of time. What succeeded or failed in the days of Gen. Robert E. Lee and Maj. Gen. George G.

Meade still beget sizzle or fizzle in today's fast-paced and competitive work world.

So, come with us now as we revisit those first three days of July 1863 when amid the fog of war the fate of a nation and the lives of so

many pivoted on the leadership skills and foibles of so few.



**F**or those of you who were having your tonsils taken out the week Mr. Geisendorfer covered the Civil War in history class, listen up. At the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, The Federal Army of the Potomac, commanded by the newly-assigned Maj. Gen. Meade, defeated the Army of Northern Virginia, led by Gen. Lee. The clash pitted long-time colleagues, friends and West Point classmates against one another in a bodacious battle of nerve and strategy. When the dust and smoke settled, roughly 53,000 were dead, wounded, captured or unaccounted for. Though Gettysburg did not officially end the Civil War, it turned the tide in favor of the Union and prefaced the North's eventual victory.

Survival at Antietam and victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville had solidified Gen. Lee's reputation as a superb military strategist and tactician, one whose battlefield savvy often compensated for numerical and materiel disadvantages. But his success, particularly at Chancellorsville just a month earlier, may have led to overconfidence and the decision to launch an offensive into the North's backyard. Despite having a clear notion of how a victory at Gettysburg would buoy the South, Gen.

**(Above)** Addressing the Agency's Leadership Development Conference, Mrs. Sallie Flavin, DCMA deputy director, exhorts the attendees to "recognize your professional and moral responsibility to motivate, mentor and bring out the best in your people as you move the Agency in the direction of its vision."

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Lee seemed less certain as to how to wage the battle. Would he embrace his proven defensive schema, or would he take an offensive posture? Seemingly, due to a number of factors, Gen. Lee appeared to lack a comprehensive battle plan — at least not one he was comfortably committed to. At Gettysburg, he largely kept his own counsel, giving short shrift to the advice and misgivings of his closest and perhaps ablest subordinate, Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, who questioned the wisdom of invading Northern territory and taking an aggressive battle tack. Gen. Lee's autonomous

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approach at Gettysburg, coupled with his uncharacteristic lack of a firm and well-understood battle plan, may have undercut the South's performance at Gettysburg.

Maj. Gen. Meade, on the other hand, took a more consensus-building approach, giving fair consideration to the ideas of his subordinate field commanders. This may be due to the fact that he had been given command of the Army of the Potomac just days before the events of Gettysburg. Nonetheless, Maj. Gen. Meade's collegial approach yielded dividends, particularly in preparation for Day 3, when Confederate units made their famous, yet futile, frontal assault on Cemetery Ridge. *A good leader, while recognizing that ultimate responsibility and accountability rest with him/her, draws upon the opinions and ideas of subordinates.* In modern biz-speak, none of us is as smart as all of us. The melding of diverse viewpoints and talents leads to team synergy and enhanced organizational performance. *Similarly, a good leader recognizes that those who are expected to carry out the plans must have a sense of ownership in the end result and be empowered to manage the processes through which organizational goals will be achieved.*

Though deservedly acclaimed as a superb military strategist and tactician, Gen. Lee earns only average marks for his communication skills. In fact, some historians contend that Gen. Lee's loose and sometimes ambiguous language may have been his Achilles heel during the Gettysburg campaign. For example, attempting to sustain the South's Day 1 momentum, Gen. Lee directed Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell to attack "if practicable" the Northern forces positioned on Cemetery Ridge. Lt. Gen.

**(Above)** Maj. Gen. Meade took command of the Union's Army of the Potomac just two days before the Battle of Gettysburg and remained in that position for the duration of the war. A West Point-educated engineer, Maj. Gen. Meade was considered a solid, though not exceptional, military strategist. His receptivity to the advice of his subordinates proved valuable at Gettysburg, but his lackluster pursuit of Gen. Lee's retreating army displeased President Lincoln. He died seven years after the war at age 57.

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Ewell, believing his troops were tired and disarrayed, decided it was not “practicable” to assault the enemy’s position. This gave the Northern forces time to reinforce their positions and successfully defend the tactically valuable ridge.

Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart’s maundering trek to Gettysburg is another example of Gen. Lee’s tendency — witting or unwitting — to inject latitude into his direction costing him dearly in the reconnaissance of the enemy forces.

Maj. Gen. Stuart’s cavalry, the “eyes and ears” of the Confederate forces at Gettysburg, was proceeding toward the town. However, because Gen. Lee had given him latitude in choosing the route, Maj. Gen. Stuart took a less direct path, initiating several fruitless skirmishes that did little more than delay his arrival at Gettysburg and deprive Gen. Lee of much-needed intelligence. As a result, Gen. Lee had to wage the battle under unfavorable circumstances. *A good leader communicates clearly and precisely and ensures the message reaches all intended recipients.*

*A good leader rebukes in private and concludes with encouragement.* When Maj. Gen. Stuart finally arrived on the scene on Day 2, Gen. Lee promptly and sternly upbraided him for his seemingly lackadaisical journey to Gettysburg. Whether such chiding was deserved is debatable, but Gen. Lee, a forgiving man and keenly aware of Maj. Gen. Stuart’s talents, ended the tête-à-tête by praising Stuart for his fortitude and contributions to the Southern army. Though he felt the sting of Gen. Lee’s sharp tone, Maj. Gen. Stuart rode off encouraged and motivated by Gen. Lee’s parting words of praise and encouragement.

As today’s motivational gurus often say, an effective leader fixes the problem, rather than affixes the blame.

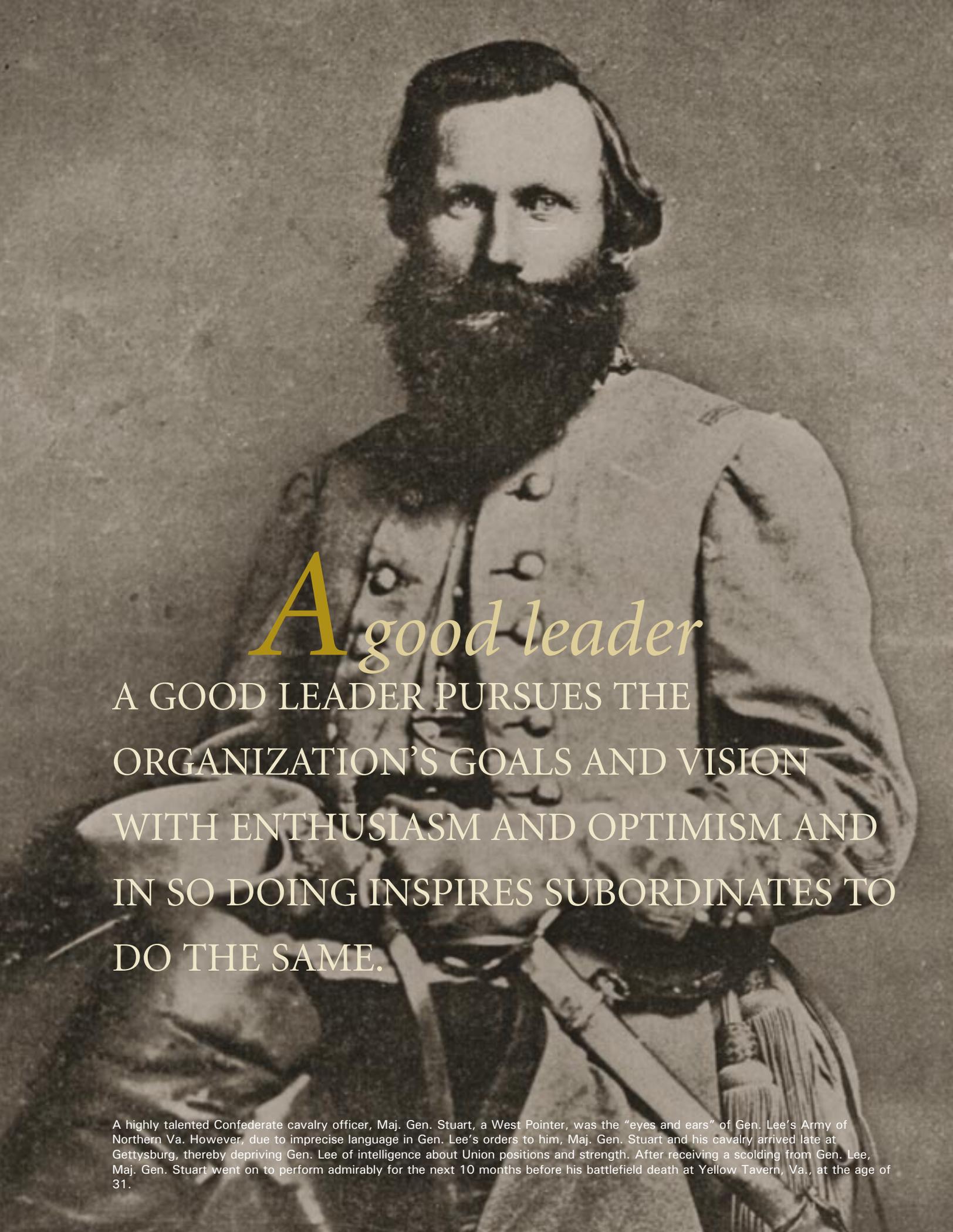
*A good leader empathizes with and shows concern, respect and compassion for subordinates.* If there is one individual who ascended to stardom at Gettysburg, it was Union Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain of Maine. A professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College, the 33-year-old father of three took a leave of absence with the intention of studying in Europe. Instead, he joined the Maine Infantry and became a central figure at Gettysburg, where his bravery, interpersonal communication skills, commitment to the plan and quick thinking helped secure the Union’s victory. Only days before

hostilities began at Gettysburg, Col. Chamberlain was given custody of 120 mutineers from Maine. This ragtag bunch of tired, hungry and battle-weary men had had their fill of the war. In modern terms you could say they had hit the proverbial wall. Major burn out. Essentially, they had become native-son POWs no longer willing to fight. But rather than treating them with disdain, Col. Chamberlain listened to their grievances, won their trust and with gentle, non-threatening entreaties persuaded them to pick up arms once again and join his unit. All but three of the 120 did so. Indeed, honey proved more effective than vinegar. These mutineers and the members of the 20th Maine under Col. Chamberlain’s command tenaciously and heroically defended Little Round Top, an elevated position critical to the protection of the Union left flank. Col. Chamberlain’s men fully understood the criticality of their mission and were so loyal to him that when their ammo ran out, they made a last-gasp defense of

**A good leader ensures that his/her subordinates understand the importance of the mission and how it fits into the organization’s vision and strategy.**



**(Above)** “...government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” recites stage and screen performer Mr. James Getty, who addressed the DCMA Leadership Development Conference in the full persona of former President Abraham Lincoln. Debunking popular myth, President Lincoln told the DCMA gathering that he drafted the Gettysburg Address on standard-sized paper in Washington, D.C., not on the back of an envelope while on the train to Pennsylvania.



# *A good leader*

A GOOD LEADER PURSUES THE ORGANIZATION'S GOALS AND VISION WITH ENTHUSIASM AND OPTIMISM AND IN SO DOING INSPIRES SUBORDINATES TO DO THE SAME.

A highly talented Confederate cavalry officer, Maj. Gen. Stuart, a West Pointer, was the "eyes and ears" of Gen. Lee's Army of Northern Va. However, due to imprecise language in Gen. Lee's orders to him, Maj. Gen. Stuart and his cavalry arrived late at Gettysburg, thereby depriving Gen. Lee of intelligence about Union positions and strength. After receiving a scolding from Gen. Lee, Maj. Gen. Stuart went on to perform admirably for the next 10 months before his battlefield death at Yellow Tavern, Va., at the age of 31.

Little Round Top with a courageous bayonet charge that drove the attacking Confederates back into the lower woods. *A good leader ensures that his/her subordinates understand the importance of the mission and how it fits into the organization's vision and strategy.*

High-profile leadership is often accompanied by commensurate risk. In storming the metaphorical beachheads of today's work environment, a leader's actions must inspire and show the way for subordinates, especially when the challenge is great. Gettysburg provides several notable examples in this regard. One is Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, whose Union I Corps — the Iron Brigade — rushed to the aid of besieged Federal troops on McPherson Ridge on Day 1. Despite being outnumbered, the brigade fervently entered the fray, following Maj. Gen. Reynolds' bold lead. A second example is that of Confederate Brig. Gen. Lewis Armistead, who rallied and led his troops in the massive attack on Cemetery Ridge on the final day of the battle. Though well aware of the peril awaiting them, Brig.

Gen. Armistead's men followed him in a frontal assault of the Northern stronghold on Cemetery Ridge. Brig. Gen. Armistead, with his hat atop his hoisted sword, led the way for his soldiers, who broke the Union line and briefly raised

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the Confederate colors on the ridge. Though the gain was short-lived, Brig. Gen. Armistead's out-in-front leadership sparked the South's one flicker of hope during that ill-fated assault known as Pickett's Charge. But as previously stated, high-profile leadership is not without risk. Maj. Gen. Reynolds and Brig. Gen. Armistead met their deaths while leading the way those two days. *Though it is wise to bear in mind that discretion is sometimes the better part of valor, a good leader models the way for subordinates, remains visible to them and willingly accepts the risk associated with the responsibilities of leadership.*



A leader's ardor and optimism can rub off on subordinates. Similarly, so too can apprehension and the lack of enthusiasm. A case in point is Lt. Gen. Longstreet — Gen. Lee's right-hand man at Gettysburg. Though a talented and highly regarded general, Lt. Gen. Longstreet opposed Gen. Lee's decision to invade Pennsylvania and once there took issue with Gen. Lee's bold battle plan. This was particularly evident in the hours before Pickett's Charge, when Lt. Gen. Longstreet, whose misgivings about storming Cemetery Ridge were dismissed by Gen.

Lee, conveyed through his demeanor a reluctance and a pessimism that his troops quickly picked up on. Not surprisingly, those Confederate soldiers and junior officers who observed Lt. Gen. Longstreet prior to the assault did not enter the saturation raid

**(Above)** Lt. Gen. Longstreet, a West Point graduate from S.C., was Gen. Lee's reliable "Old War Horse." Nonetheless, Lt. Gen. Longstreet vocally disagreed with many aspects of Gen. Lee's offensive-oriented battle plan at Gettysburg. His post-war criticism of Gen. Lee's decision-making at Gettysburg evoked the ire of many Southerners. After the war, Lt. Gen. Longstreet became friends with Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and served in a variety of government posts. Like his Civil War adversary, Col. Chamberlain, Lt. Gen. Longstreet lived to age 83.

*A good leader recognizes and accepts responsibility and accountability for all that happens within the purview of his/her authority.*

in a fit of zeal. In today's workplace, such an occurrence might be categorized as a self-fulfilling prophecy. *A good leader pursues the organization's goals and vision with enthusiasm and optimism and in so doing inspires subordinates to do the same.*

To a notable degree, Gen. Lee's decision to take an aggressive approach at Gettysburg was based on an errant optimism following several improbable Southern victories. But as contemporary wisdom suggests, it can be risky — and naïve — to believe one's own press clippings. In that regard, a good leader knows that past success is no guarantee of future success. And this brings us back to the point about a good leader's willingness to accept the ultimate blame and shame when the plan goes awry, when fate conspires harshly and when the endeavor falls short of the vision. In



lamenting the outcome at Gettysburg, Gen. Lee said, "It was all my fault," personifying in the noblest of voices that *a good leader recognizes and accepts responsibility for all that happens within the purview of his or her authority.*



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**W**ith final reports tendered and the evening darkness closing in on Day 3, the assembled pilgrims bundled their trappings and departed Southern Pennsylvania for more familiar territory — across the Potomac, across the Mississippi, across latitude 36/30 — to rejoin and share some lessons of war with colleagues at field offices and headquarters elements. And while the DCMA forces suffered no casualties during their encounter with history, it is hoped that they will long remember what was said and

what was done there. From their experience may they be dedicated to the unfinished work that others before them have so nobly advanced. Indeed, it is altogether fitting and proper that they do so.

#### **Tom Gelli**

Tom Gelli is the chief of Congressional Affairs, DCMA Headquarters. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla., and a master's degree from the Kogod School of Business at American University, Washington, D.C.

**(Above)** Brig. Gen. Lewis Addison Armistead led his troops in the massive attack on Cemetery Ridge on the final day of the battle. Though well aware of the peril awaiting them, Brig. Gen. Armistead's men followed him in a frontal assault of the Northern stronghold on Cemetery Ridge, and his out-in-front leadership sparked the South's one flicker of hope during that ill-fated assault known as Pickett's Charge.