

The Underside of Command

Killer Angels – A Leadership Case Study
General James Longstreet and the Underside of Command

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Case Study Objective and Audience

Organizational leaders are often called upon to make difficult decisions. Frequently, personal judgment is the primary decision making tool, especially when key facts are impossible or impractical to obtain. Executing decisions that have been handed down from “the top” creates pragmatic quandaries for subordinate leaders who may perceive and digest rapidly changing facts more accurately than their superiors. This phenomenon generates moral dilemmas that can make subordinate leadership an especially delicate art. Walking a tight-rope between following-through on stated plans vs. changing the directives of senior leadership at the executor level has both strategic and tactical implications. Michael Shaara’s (1974) *The Killer Angels* illustrates the complexity of this principle through the leadership decisions of General James A. Longstreet at the battle of Gettysburg.

The purpose of this case study is to examine the issues facing a subordinate leader in a complex, fluid, and high-stakes decision making environment when top-down plans are clearly not the best solution. The intended audience includes subordinate leaders that are near the top of the organizational control structure. Longstreet’s position as General, reporting to Robert E. Lee, the Commanding General of the Confederate army, can be analogous to a modern general manager, vice president, or senior manager depending upon the size and structure of the organization. The lessons learned from this case study may also be applicable to junior layers of management where decisions based on incorrect information are funneled down to subordinate leaders who are compelled to execute directives precisely.

The Killer Angels – Synopsis

Michael Shaara’s (1974) *The Killer Angels* uses historical fiction to combine historical events with fabricated dialogue between important figures. Union characters include John Buford, a relatively obscure cavalry general, and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a famous infantry colonel, college professor, and eventual Governor of Maine. The primary Confederate characters include General Robert E. Lee, a beloved individual who is perhaps excessively revered by confederate soldiers; General James Longstreet, a sullen battle-hardened career soldier; and General John Bell Hood, the man left to execute one of the two most devastating orders in the campaign. There is no single protagonist in Shaara’s novel; each character is portrayed in turn as highly significant.

Gettysburg was a profound and pivotal battle representing the first juncture where the South conveyed the war onto northern soil. The Confederate plan was brilliantly cast, calling for a series of maneuvers that would potentially threaten Washington, D.C. The novel illustrates the providential nature of a series of small, but important events that literally saved the continuation

of the United States. Shaara pulls the reader through the problematic contradictions of rapid-response leadership in complex situations. The novel evaluates emotional, moral, and ethical tensions by exposing the reader to three days of heart-tugging 19th century, brother-against-brother, infantry warfare from the perspective of each main character.

Brief History of the Battle and Synopsis of the Book

Until the Battle of Gettysburg, the South had dominated the war (Goss, 2004). The Confederate army moved north targeting Harrisburg, the capitol of Pennsylvania. Lee's objective was to create a decisive situation whereby the Union would be forced to negotiate a settlement. Complete coincidence found convergence between the advanced parties of both armies just north of Gettysburg. Each side, believing God was at the helm of their battle, interpreted events of the war with special significance. During the first day of the battle, Lee's forces drove the advanced Union guard through the town of Gettysburg and into the foothills south of the city. Lee wanted to press his advantage but his forces were not in a position to concentrate power. The Union, owing to the foresight of John Buford, quickly brought forward sufficient troops to retain the foothills (Cemetery Ridge) that overlooked Gettysburg. It was this strategic positioning of Union forces that led to the Confederacy's extreme difficulty in day two, and their near destruction in day three.

Perceiving the first day's successful battle as a form of divine approval, Lee organized a sequence of attacks designed to break both ends of the Union's flanks on day two, and pierce their middle on day three. Though perceived as a victory by Lee, the second day was a substantial failure. Inaccurately perceiving the realities of the situation, Lee forged a plan for one final concentrated attack. Day three featured the infamous Pickett's Charge, which caused immense devastation for the Confederate army. During the combined battle, the Confederacy suffered 28,063 casualties. Pickett's charge alone accounted for 10,000 casualties in a single day ("History by the Numbers", 2003, p. 68).

Scene Selection: Southern Attack of Little Roundtop

The initial engagement of Union troops by Confederate soldiers at Gettysburg was unintentional. Subordinate Confederate leaders at the front thought they had gained a superior advantage, which turned out to be a costly assumption. Pursuing the engagement jeopardized the primary strategy of drawing the Union troops into an open field contest. Generals on the scene saw only a portion of the real picture and were disadvantaged by not having cavalry based intelligence. Without proper intelligence, Lee allowed the engagement to continue. Lee viewed initial success at Gettysburg as important momentum and determined to continue offensive action in order to not lose tactical supremacy. General Longstreet was brought forward to counsel with Lee, and strongly advised disengagement until the full advantage could be known. Longstreet reminds Lee of the original maneuver-based plan and reiterates the potential consequences resulting from a lack of intelligence. He furthermore suggests the court-martial of General Stuart for failing to provide needed intelligence, which does nothing more than cause Lee to become overly protective towards his wayward cavalry officer. Consequently, Longstreet's recommendations are entirely dismissed.

The scene continues with Lee implementing a battle plan that calls for an 18th century style echelon attack over a five mile horizontal line. He orders Longstreet to attack the Union's southernmost flank. Leading up to this point, there had been multiple discussions between Lee and Longstreet over maneuver based tactics vs. echelon attacks. Longstreet preferred the movement and cover afforded by maneuver tactics. Shaara portrays Lee as having the opinion that Longstreet is overly cautious and unduly protective of his men. Shaara depicts Longstreet as a victim. Though Lee refers constantly to him as his "Old War Horse" and "most experienced general," Lee continually fails to accept his counsel at Gettysburg in whole, or in part. Lee is a warrior of the past and seeks a grand victory of the Napoleonic class. He feels one grand battle will force the North to quit the war. Lee is growing more convinced that the evidence, from his perspective, supports his theory. Longstreet attempts repeatedly to explain the situation as it really is, and requests multiple times to be allowed to maneuver around and behind the Union flank. Lee, weary of dialogue, fearful that he may be losing the advantage gained in day one, and somewhat suspect of Longstreet's motives and war-fighting theories, expressly orders Longstreet to attack in accordance with the plan.



FIGURE 1- GENERAL LONGSTREET

The strategy is fraught with error and results in an impossible attack on a nearly impenetrable location known as Little Roundtop. During this attack, Longstreet's key

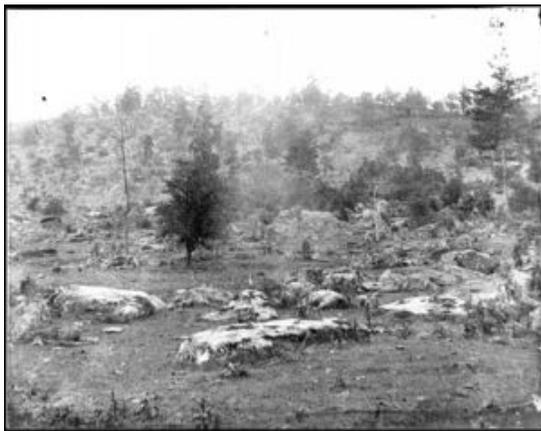


FIGURE 2 - LITTLE ROUNDTOP

commander, General Hood explains to Longstreet the very thing that Longstreet had previously explained to Lee; that a maneuver around the Northern lines would deliver swift and sure victory because the North had failed to adequately support their rear guard. Shaara leaves the reader with a perception of Longstreet as a man who has accepted a bad outcome. He robotically delivers the order, knowing all the while the futility of what he is doing. To one of Hood's aids, Longstreet said: "Sonny boy [...] I been telling General Lee that same [...] thing for two days [...] there aint no point in bringing it up again. Tell him to attack as ordered" (Shaara, 1974, p. 198).

Hood, in an impassioned plea and personal visit, appeals to Longstreet one last time.

General, the ground is strewn with boulders. They are dug in all over the ground and there are guns in the rocks above. Every move I make is observed. If I attack as ordered I will lose half my division, and they will still be looking down our throats [...] They don't even need rifles to defend that. All they need to do is roll rocks down on you (Shaara, 1974, p. 201).

For a suspended moment in time Longstreet reconsiders taking the old debate back to Lee. However, upon reflection of prior conversations with Lee, his concern for Lee's health, and a sentiment that Lee will not listen anyway, Longstreet torpidly confirmed orders to his commanders – "attack as ordered." Hood does so under protest after Longstreet explains:

The Commanding General will not approve a move to the right. I argued it yesterday. I argued it all morning. [...] I've been arguing against any attack at all. How can I call this one off? We have our orders. Go on in (Shaara, 1974, p. 201).

The resulting loss is felt severely upon the morale of the men and negatively impacts their confidence in Longstreet. Over half the Confederate men involved in Little Roundtop were wounded, killed, or captured, and General Hood was seriously wounded. Few officers or men understood that Longstreet was following orders. Lee was revered to such an extent, that even the few who did know would not dare believe him capable of error. Therefore, Longstreet was held singularly accountable for the results by his men.

Major Themes and Case Questions

Adaptive Iterative Decision Making Needed

Leaders, particularly in rapid-response crisis environments, have to make quick decisions based on whatever perspective they can garner. A critical component of that perspective is the counsel of subordinate leaders. Dynamic situations are constantly evolving. Facts may become situational in that they change depending on the conditions of the environment, or point of view of the leader. Processes designed to facilitate this, coupled with understood delegation of authority or empowerment to adjust to changing conditions, naturally generate tension between leaders obfuscating facts for the senior leader. An important theme in the scene of Little Roundtop is the continuous feeling that senior leadership has prescribed specifically the path to take, and no changing condition should be considered by subordinate leadership once the plan is set.

This leads to the question: How many attempts should a subordinate leader make to a superior for a new answer to the same question when the subordinate perceives changes in fact that the superior does not recognize? One can ask if Longstreet persisted enough to help Lee understand the real nature of the situation. Some might feel that Longstreet failed in his duties by not forcing the issue upon Hood's request. The general officers were close-knit, and Lee would likely have understood the need for a conference with a top division commander. On the other hand, others might feel that Longstreet had a responsibility on behalf of the organization to maintain good order and discipline, and follow the prescribed plan. The view largely depends on the organizational culture and the criticality of the situation. Most leaders understand the need to move forward even without perfect information. This is juxtaposed to the need for decentralized adjustments to formal decisions based on new information. This juxtaposition can serve as a trap, as it did for Longstreet. While he could have requested another review of the plan, he did not because he likely felt a responsibility to the good order and discipline of the organization by executing orders given.

Highly dynamic situations require a nimble approach. Warfare, in some ways, is analogous to a fast paced aggressive business concern. In such cases, a distinct advantage exists when decision makers on the ground are prepared to adjust the master plan to the situation at hand. Where organizational culture supports risk taking at the operational layer, it is advantageous to implement a cycle of rapid evaluation and decision making processes which help the organization adapt to changing conditions. The key is for intra-organizational leadership dynamics to flow seamlessly up and down, forward and back, and side to side, implementing a concept of “responsible autonomy,” where individuals are in a position to take responsibility (Hindle, 2006).

However, cultures that foster entrepreneurial risk taking alone, without some level of control, run the risk of endangering the order, health, and discipline of the entire organization. Such a case is the unethical behavior by middle-managers at Solomon Brothers by making improper bids on treasury bonds which led to heavy penalties and negatively impacted the company. Another example is the resultant actions of subordinate leaders at Arthur Andersen who obstructed justice by destruction of evidence, which in due course helped bring the company to ruin (Kuratko & Goldsby, 2004). Distributed decision-making authority clearly requires control processes.

Role of Personal Consequence in a Leader’s Actions

Ethical leadership requires clear understanding with respect to tensions created by decisions regarding such things as profits vs. values, owners vs. workers, and leaders vs. followers. Such scenarios require comprehension of the trade-offs, and the ability to make a decision that is the best decision without overly considering personal impact. The true test of one’s ethical endurance results when a dilemma includes highly personal implications. When personal interests are in conflict with organizational interests, achieving organizational value-based actions becomes more complicated (Prilleltensky, 2000, p. 146). Lee felt that Longstreet cared too deeply for his men, and Longstreet resented the assumption. It could be argued that he wrestled over the wrong moral question. His concern was more about the right thing to do as an officer in his station, than it was about the issues of best positioning to win the battle. This leads to the question: What role does bias towards personal benefit play in moral-based decision making? Did Longstreet care too much for his reputation with Lee? Did Longstreet place this personal concern over the need to force a different decision in the Little Roundtop battle plan? If so, did he fail to make an unbiased decision that was best for the overall organization?

Personal interests may include the protection of self-esteem and self-worth, or even the repulsion of insult and the protection of personal honor, as in the case of Longstreet. Protecting one’s ethical integrity is aided by a firm rooting in one’s spiritual faith and personal self-concept. It requires commitment to self, to associates, to subordinate leaders, and to community. Personal consequence, therefore, plays a significant role in moral-based decision making. The leader’s obligation in such cases must always be to those who are entrusted to his/her care. This includes a balancing act that has to occur between the needs of the organization vs. the needs of the individuals. The need of the organization, being a community need, generally comes first – but

should be reconciled with thoughtful consideration of the alternatives and consequences. If properly done, the community will support their subjugation to the greater good.

Dunfee (1991), from the Wharton School of Business, authored an article addressing the nature of extant social contracts. The concept is that communities expressly or implicitly contract themselves with a set of norms that govern the operational conduct of the community. In this case study, the community is the army. In practical application the community could be a business, a church, or a school, etc. Members of a community sacrifice rights and privileges to belong. In return, members expect fairness in accordance with the community contract (Drucker, 2001). When decisions that are known to be bad are propagated throughout the community, members of the community may withdraw the trust they have committed as part of the extant contract. Ross (2006) in a *Harvard Management Update* confirms the critical nature of trust in organizational settings. In militaristic settings, trust evaporates more gradually owing to the express contract tying the member to the community by law. However, in business, non-profit, and social settings, community members are free to exit a community generally at will. Therefore, knowingly executing a poor decision endangers the trust and long-term viability of a human organization.

At first blush it could be argued that Longstreet's decision was based on the community's "greater good." After all, he subordinated his desire to outflank the enemy for Lee's plan of a frontal assault. However, on closer review there are two important considerations that may lead to a contrary conclusion. First, Longstreet loved the army. He loved the discipline. It was his way of life and he was intensely loyal to the military as a concept. Second, and as a result of the first, Longstreet considered the greater good of the command structure, over the greater good of the organization and mission. His decision preserved the veracity of the chain of command, but at a cost of half his men.

An important lesson is derived from this analysis. Subordinate leaders can easily get trapped into being loyal to the leadership structure of the organization. They do this in an effort to preserve their position and future within that structure.

The Value of Disobedience

Not executing directives or changing key elements of a plan at a subordinate command level, particularly in the face of orders to the contrary, may result in either extreme reward or extreme punishment. If the change in direction is successful, the leader may be lauded. If the change is unsuccessful then the leader has jeopardized the greater good, and will be subject to punishment. This raises a series of important questions: What are the dangers of strict obedience? When should a subordinate leader choose selective disobedience? When is the old cliché "it is better to beg forgiveness than ask permission" valid?

Did Longstreet consider selective disobedience as an option? There is no record provided in the literature that addresses this question. Inference from Longstreet's strict compulsion to military order provides the only insight, which is that Longstreet appeared to never consider disobedience. Interestingly, neither did Hood. In both cases, Hood and/or Longstreet could have performed a maneuver right that may never have been comprehended by higher authority until

after the fact. Shifting right would have taken some time, but the results would have sealed a victory at Gettysburg. The risk taken could have easily been disguised under the confusion in the fog of battle. But, it was a matter of “honor” that compelled obedience to orders. A strict code of military discipline, in their minds, kept them from thinking creatively about the situation.

Hood’s counterpart, Joshua Chamberlain, actually disobeyed orders by directing a

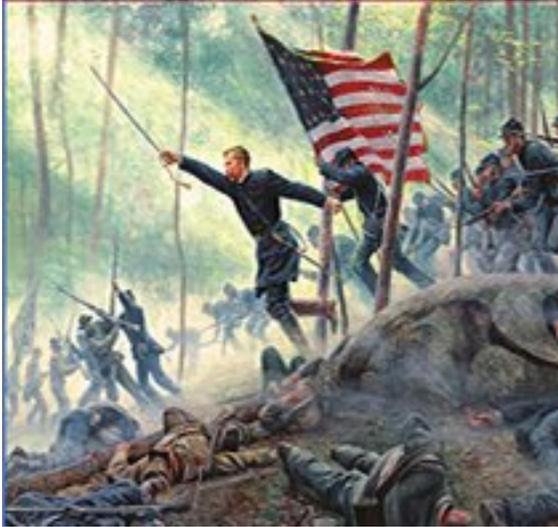


FIGURE 3 - CHAMBERLAIN'S CHARGE

bayonet charge that was immensely risky – yet secured the victory that day for the North on Little Roundtop. Had Chamberlain held his original position as ordered, he likely would have been overrun and the Confederacy would have won Gettysburg. Likewise, had Hood exerted selective disobedience and used the fog of battle as the excuse, he would have been the lauded hero of the day. The same could be said of Longstreet.

Stanley Milgram, as quoted by Laing (1999), in a study on the psychological effects of obedience to authority, explains that when a person is unable to comprehend the entire act, he or she is more likely to strictly obey directives of authority, even against their own conscience. In warfare or in business,

decisions are fragmented such that the entire human experience may be relegated to some sub-component of the event. This phenomenon compels individuals to be more inclined to obedience than they otherwise might. The results can be perilous consequences such as losing half the division in a single day, and justify it by being “obedient” to orders.

Business operates in analogous scenarios. Disobedience may bring success, but the process extracts significant political capital, especially if cultural powers are offended in the process. The decision to disobey, or to obey a poor directive is probably a situational event. Analysis of risk vs. reward has to be done by the decision maker. The overriding lesson learned from the Longstreet experience, particularly when considering the Milgram study (Laing, 1999), is that subordinate leaders cannot let their understanding and control of the situation be fragmented such that the decision process also separates the human experience from the outcome or objective.

Case Application

This case is applicable in any leadership setting that involves multiple tiers of leaders. Tiered leadership scenarios exist in hierarchical organizations, such as military and business structures that rely heavily upon directives from higher authority. Tiered leadership also exists in highly matrixed or decentralized structures. Virtually every organizational model runs the risk of facing the same issues as did Lee, Longstreet, and Hood at Little Roundtop, though to a lesser extremity of consequence.

Leaders that have direct reports must be aware of the box in which they unwittingly place their most important subordinates. On occasion, I find a bit of Lee, Longstreet, and Hood in myself as I conduct the affairs of my business. There are times when political pressure builds and requires the execution of an “order” in spite of my well communicated view to the contrary. At some point, I have to evaluate my career safety which leads me to impatiently brush aside a suggestion of my most valuable subordinate leader. Am I stifling creative energy and the will to continue to bring innovative solutions to the table? Am I crushing the very thing I espouse to develop? Even if it is done only once, how much damage to the innovative culture occurs?

Sometimes I recognize in myself the “victim” that was Longstreet where I must be the “executor” of directives in which I have no faith (Bennett & Miles, 2006). As such, my subordinate leaders are like Hood – they beg me to change, but I do not because the options, I feel, available to me are gone. While death is not the opportunity cost, certain levels of valuable employee attrition has been, to some degree, similar in affect. In fact, I recognize now, my most valuable employee (who resigned two months ago) was faced with an order through me from the top to take a proverbial “Little Roundtop,” i.e., an impossible task. While I commiserated with him, I was unsuccessful in getting higher authority to change. Reduced to an executor of someone else’s task, like Longstreet, I torpidly compelled him to “attack as ordered” (i.e., build that technology environment without support, knowing that it will ultimately fail). The question for myself therefore: Did I do enough? Did I keep the issue ever before the top leadership? Perhaps the answer to the dilemma is neither black nor white deriving neither a clear “yes” or “no.” Is it possible that in reality there are no perfect decisions, and we should be resolved to accept a certain degree of attrition (or casualty count) in exchange for the longer-term “greater good?” The dilemma becomes substantially more difficult when one realizes certain objections to orders are not worth career suicide – as a subordinate leader, it is imperative that I maintain enough political clout to continue to operate within the command structure (i.e., live to fight another day).

Subordinate leaders need to recognize the three themes identified in this case study: Iterative decision making situations, the role of personal consequence in decision making, and the value of disobedience. Leaders should seek to understand the complexities of the decisions they make, and the decisions they force their junior leaders to make. Is there opportunity in the command structure to alter plans, even rapidly executing plans, to improve the outcome? Does the culture support decentralized and dynamic leadership? Does the organization tend to fragment experiences such that it is easy to dehumanize a decision, making it easier to execute a bad plan? These moral tensions are faced by business leaders in subordinate leadership roles every day. Thus, this phenomenon is what I call the underside of command.

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