



Leadership Lessons from General Grant

*U. S. Grant demonstrated traits
valuable for any leadership role*

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IN AN AGE where many are trying to rewrite history according to radical ideologies, it's vitally important to listen to real historians.

Most people know that Ulysses S. Grant served as the victorious general of the Civil War and later President of the United States. Most probably don't know how admired he was in his time. Noted historian Stephen E. Ambrose writes:

Ulysses S. Grant was the most popular American of the nineteenth century, both at home and abroad.

Ambrose's assessment of Grant as a general:

Grant was a great general, as good as any America ever produced, far better than most.

In reading about Grant in his own words, from comments by those who served with him, and from modern historians, I have been continually impressed by the way Grant thought and acted. Here are seven valuable leadership lessons from the general.

1. Decisiveness and Courage

The essential elements in his victories were his willingness to make decisions and the will to carry them out. (Ambrose)

All leadership involves risk. Life is full of uncertainties, dangers, and unpredictable events. Leadership involves the willingness to *decide* and to accept responsibility for the consequences. That's why the requirement of leadership is courage.

Along with the courage to bear the burden of responsibility, something that jumps out at you when you observe Grant on campaign is his decisiveness. That's why he quickly became President Lincoln's favorite general.

Not only did Grant demonstrate these qualities, he expected the same from his subordinate generals. He explained his expectations in these words:



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One thing, however, should be impressed on corps commanders. If they see [an opportunity] they should take advantage of such knowledge and act promptly without waiting for orders.

This expectation of decisiveness points us to our second lesson.

2. Grant empowered his subordinates

Working with executives in many companies and organizations, I routinely find them working in the mid-range of their “leadership ladder” (explained in point 3) rather than at the top. Too many are spending time doing things that should be done by subordinate leaders. Grant refused to do this.

Consider the following orders he sent. Writing to General Sherman, he said,

I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of campaign, but simply lay down the work it is desirable to have done and leave you free to execute it in your own way. Submit to me, however, as early as you can, your plan of operations.

To Sherman at Vicksburg:

Proceed ... in such a manner as circumstances, and your own judgment, may dictate.

To General Burnside at Knoxville:

Being there, you can tell better how to resist Longstreet's attack than I can direct.

If Grant wanted initiative and decisiveness from his generals, he had to empower them to do so. Executives today should take note.

3. Grant was determined to work “at the top of his license”

Horace Porter served with Grant during the war, and later wrote about his experiences in *Campaigning with Grant*. He observed:

Grant studiously avoided performing any duty which someone else could do as well or better than he. . . . He was one of the few men holding high position who did not waste valuable hours by giving his personal attention to petty details. . . . He held subordinates to a strict accountability in the performance of such duties and kept his own time for thought.

Any modern executive should feel proud to be described in these terms!

I have frequently written about “working at the top of your license,” a term borrowed from the world of medicine. It describes the pursuit of **effectiveness**, “doing the right things.” There is a metaphorical ladder which describes all the potential activities to which you can devote your time and energies. Working at the top of your license means applying the highest and best use of your time and energy toward your most important roles and results.

During a critical juncture in the war, many suggested that Grant personally take charge of the Army of the Potomac. As supreme commander of all the armies, he refused, saying,

By attending to the details, [General Meade] relieves me of much unnecessary work, and gives me more time to think and to mature my general plans.

General Grant never became fogged regarding his role and highest responsibilities.

4. Grant communicated clearly

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes, all temperaments and personalities, and with widely differing styles. One thing all great leaders have in common is *clarity in communication*. Grant was remarkable in this regard.

General Meade's chief of staff said this:

There is one striking feature of Grant's orders; no matter how hurriedly he may write them on the field, no one ever had the slightest doubt as to their meaning, or even

has to read them over a second time to understand them.

One of my favorite quotes on clear communication is from the ancient Roman Cicero: “The aim of writing is not simply to be understood, but to make it impossible to be misunderstood.” Grant obviously fulfilled this ideal in his orders.

Clear communication in verbal or written form requires clear *thinking* and discipline. That’s another reason why thinking time is not a luxury for leaders, but a necessity.

5. Grant thought for himself

Most military leaders of Grant’s generation were enthralled with the theories and tactics of Napoleon. Grant commented about many of his fellow Northern generals:

They were always thinking about what Napoleon would do. Unfortunately for their plans, the rebels would be thinking about something else. . . . Even Napoleon showed that; for my impression is that his first success came because he made war in his own way, and not in imitation of others.

The risks of leadership tempt many to seek the safety of conformity and conventional wisdom. The best leaders work hard to maintain their intellectual independence. Thinking for yourself and challenging the currents of the day again require courage.

6. Grant set an example

Horace Porter related a humorous story about Grant during the siege of Petersburg:

The day the wharf was completed and planked over the general took a stroll along it ... and had not gone far when a sentinel called out: “It’s against orders to come on the wharf with a lighted cigar.” The general

at once took his Havana out of his mouth and threw it into the river, saying, “I don’t like to lose my smoke, but the sentinel’s right. He evidently isn’t going to let me disobey my own orders.”

Leaders squander their credibility and influence if they act like rules are only for subordinates while they are above them. Grant’s example here is good to remember.

7. Grant endured criticism with grace

Anyone who attempts to lead will be criticized, often unfairly. Monday Morning Quarterbacking by others is simply part of the role. Writing years later, Grant commented:

But later experience has taught me two lessons: first, that things are seen plainer after the events have occurred; second, that the most confident critics are generally those who know the least about the matter criticized.

You can hear the amusement and teasing in Grant’s words. He had the courage to deal with vicious criticism while he was leading, and he did not succumb to bitterness against his critics. He accepted that such criticism is simply part of the “heat in the kitchen,” as Harry Truman said.

In his personal life, Grant also showed courage, determination, and selflessness. Knowing he was dying from throat cancer, he endured the suffering to complete his *Memoirs*, wanting to provide for his family after his death. He died just days after completing it.

General Ulysses S. Grant not only led the Union army to victory in the terrible Civil War, saving our nation, but in his leadership demonstrated numerous positive principles and examples any leader can benefit from today. **L**