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General Washington's Wisdom

Bill McCurry



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Christmas night 1776 was cold and icy. Three Continental Army groups tried to cross the Delaware River for what we know as “The Battle of Trenton.” Only the 2,400 troops directly under General George Washington’s command made it. What propelled Washington’s troops to succeed while two other respected military leaders failed? What are today’s lessons from our nation’s first management expert?

Why did Washington risk those lives in a blizzard? The Continental Army was basically broke. Supplies were exhausted. Some men walked barefoot across the snow and ice. More critically, the Continental Army had been driven south into Pennsylvania without winning even a skirmish after the British forces landed in New York. Our soldiers were disheartened. Most planned to quit the army when their enlistment was

up December 31st. Many had already deserted what they saw as a hopeless fight against the world’s largest military force.

Washington looked across the Delaware and saw more than the Hessians guarding Trenton, New Jersey. He saw essential food and military supplies. More important, he saw how much this victory would do for his troops’ morale. Thousands had been taken prisoner. Frustrated with constant loss, the remaining soldiers took pride in Washington’s bold, risky, crazy plan. To ensure everyone understood the mission, the Continental Army password that night was “Victory or Death.” It was victory at the Battle of Trenton, shaking the British who didn’t think Washington could accomplish this feat. Washington grabbed the needed food and supplies and retreated back across the Delaware.

On January 3rd, Washington faked a new attack on Trenton. That night he kept a few soldiers in camp to stoke the fires, as if American troops were there. When the British General Cornwallis awoke the next morning, he saw empty Yankee camps with the fires still being stoked. Washington and his troops were 12 miles away winning the Battle of Princeton. There the “rebels” trounced the British troops and again made off with additional needed food and supplies.

As a manager, Washington knew his strengths and weaknesses. He couldn’t hold Trenton or Princeton after

British reinforcements arrived, so he hit and ran. He spread the word of the Yankee successes, stimulating new and renewed enlistments and solving his personnel problem. He understood soldiers want to join the winning team and appreciate a commander in the trenches who exhibits true leadership.

It wasn't easy building a unified army from ragtag volunteers from different states to effect independence from Britain. No one thought of building a new nation. State militias were often more organized and disciplined than the Continental Army. General Washington also had to deal with other problems—like grave robbing. Impoverished soldiers searched graves for saleable valuables. Even army officers' graves weren't immune to pillage. A great manager, Washington sent a General Order to the troops: "The general and the friends of the deceased, are desirous of all the information that can be given, of the perpetrators of this abominable crime, that he, or they, may be made an example, to deter others from committing so wicked and shameful of an offence." It wasn't the standard "violators will be prosecuted." Why was this effective? It said Washington and his buddies would "make an example" out of grave robbers—a real threat that got people's attention.

A superb manager, Washington understood people. He got their attention. He played to their motivations. He formed a winning team people wanted to join. He broadcast their successes. All lessons from 1776 we can apply today! **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.