

Battle Cry

Finding leadership inspiration in the trenches.



Custer's leadership mistake at Little Big Horn? He didn't consider the possibility that the Indians might stand and fight. Best Buy's Julie Roemen and Blue Knight founder Jeff Appelquist study the results.



In 1876, on a plain in Montana Territory, U.S. Army General George Armstrong Custer rode with his soldiers into battle against the Lakota and Cheyenne Indians with a head full of erroneous assumptions: His opponents would scatter when attacked, making their superior numbers irrelevant; he'd be able to divide his soldiers into flanking branches and prevent the Indians' escape. Native American fighters wiped out his force at Little Big Horn.

Jeff Appelquist of Blue Knight Battlefield Seminars (blueknightseminars.com) believes that scenes of battle like Little Big Horn hold crucial lessons for today's business leaders.

"When faced with a complex problem, most people fall back on their tools and skills that have worked in the past," Appelquist says. "Often that's not enough to raise them to the next level of insight they need to deal with added complexity. Custer is one example. He wasn't able to consider what would happen if the Indians turned and fought, or if it might be bad to split his forces."

Appelquist is in the business of transforming battlefields into classrooms

for people eager to become better leaders. For about \$4,000 per person (excluding travel), he takes groups to Little Big Horn and Gettysburg, where they review the military strategies that played out there, focus on the moments of leadership truth for the commanders, and create their own leadership manifestos. A former Marine Corps infantry officer, Appelquist conceived Blue Knight while working as an HR generalist at Richfield-based Best Buy. For a year, he ran Blue Knight as a Best Buy training program, and then spun it off as his own business in February.

Marilee Hoban, an HR director at Best Buy, acknowledges that history has never been her favorite subject, but she found her two Blue Knight trips to Gettysburg engaging: "We had people with quite a range in their passion for history. It didn't matter. Everybody took away something they could use to improve their leadership style."

"We learned about one general who got shot off his horse, leaving his troops in disarray," says Brian Gauger, senior vice president for Fresenius Medical Services in Apple Valley, a company whose Gettysburg-

bound groups have ranged from field employees to senior management in such diverse areas as acquisitions, joint ventures, and market development.

"That led to a discussion about whether key leaders should be out in front leading by example or in the background observing and strategizing. It was easy to tie in with our day-to-day work." Every few months, Appelquist returns to Fresenius to lead follow-up discussions about how participants use what they've learned. "This is something we do to reinvest in our successful people," Gauger adds.

The battlefield experience—with its ghosts of leadership decisions good and bad—is more powerful than listening to a management guru in a conference room, Appelquist believes: "If you are a thinking, feeling, caring citizen, you can't help being affected." —*Jack El-Hai*



Jeff Appelquist