

# SACRED GROUND

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM  
GETTYSBURG & THE LITTLE BIGHORN

JEFF APPELQUIST



SACRED GROUND © copyright 2010 by Jeff Appelquist. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, by photography or xerography or by any other means, by broadcast or transmission, by translation into any kind of language, nor by recording electronically or otherwise, without permission in writing from the author, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 10: 1-59298-323-5

ISBN 13: 978-1-59298-323-0

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2010901065

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: 2010

14 13 12 11 10      5 4 3 2 1



BEAVER'S  
POND  
PRESS

Beaver's Pond Press, Inc.  
7104 Ohms Lane, Suite 101  
Edina, MN 55439-2129  
(952) 829-8818  
[www.BeaversPondPress.com](http://www.BeaversPondPress.com)

To order, visit [www.BeaversPondBooks.com](http://www.BeaversPondBooks.com)  
or call (800) 901-3480. Reseller discounts available.

*This book is dedicated to  
a business leader who was also  
my first and finest professor of history,  
my father,  
Carl Allen Appelquist*

*I love you Dad*



*“Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars:  
see that ye be not troubled: for all these things  
must come to pass, but the end is not yet.  
For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom  
against kingdom.... But he that shall endure unto the end,  
the same shall be saved.”*

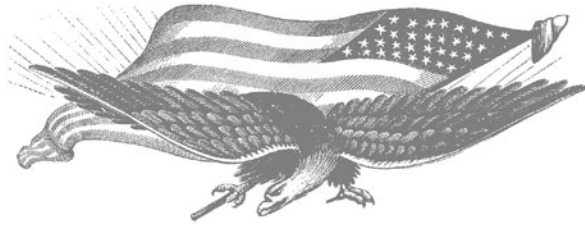
—Matthew 24:6–13—

*“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more....  
In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man  
As modest stillness and humility:  
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
Then imitate the action of the tiger.  
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,  
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour’d rage.  
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect.”*

—Henry V 3.1, 1.1–9—

*“Business is war.”*

—Countless Business Leaders Since Commerce Began—



# Contents

<i>List of Maps</i> .....	<i>ix</i>
<i>Foreword</i> .....	<i>xi</i>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>Prologue</i> .....	<i>11</i>

## **PART ONE: CREATE COMMON PURPOSE**

CHAPTER ONE ★ Gettysburg: McPherson's Ridge .....	17
<i>Case Study: Jack Welch and General Electric</i> .....	28
<i>Leadership Lesson One:</i> <i>If You Are Without a Common Purpose, Find One</i> .....	33
CHAPTER TWO ★ Little Bighorn: The Indian Village .....	35
<i>Case Study: Magic Johnson Enterprises</i> .....	45
<i>Leadership Lesson Two: A Unified Vision Must</i> <i>Permeate the Team</i> .....	50

## **PART TWO: BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS & TRUST**

CHAPTER THREE ★ Gettysburg: Longstreet Memorial.....	55
<i>Case Study: Meg Whitman and eBay</i> .....	68
<i>Leadership Lesson Three: Cherish People</i> <i>Who Give You Honest Feedback</i> .....	72

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER FOUR ★ Little Bighorn: Custer's Advance . . . . .	75
<i>Case Study: Chainsaw Al Dunlap</i> . . . . .	89
<i>Leadership Lesson Four:</i>	
<i>Without Trust the Battle Is Lost</i> . . . . .	94

### PART THREE:

#### COMMUNICATE CLEARLY & SHARE INFORMATION

CHAPTER FIVE ★ Gettysburg: Cemetery Hill . . . . .	99
<i>Case Study: Johnson &amp; Johnson</i> . . . . .	112
<i>Leadership Lesson Five:</i>	
<i>Confirm That the Audience Understands Your Message</i> . . . . .	116
CHAPTER SIX ★ Little Bighorn: Medicine Tail Coulee . . . . .	119
<i>Case Study: Pixar Animation Studios</i> . . . . .	132
<i>Leadership Lesson Six:</i>	
<i>Hold Information Close at Your Peril</i> . . . . .	136

### PART FOUR:

#### SEEK SELF-KNOWLEDGE & LEARNING

CHAPTER SEVEN ★ Gettysburg: The Peach Orchard . . . . .	141
<i>Case Study: Oprah Winfrey</i> . . . . .	152
<i>Leadership Lesson Seven: Look in the Mirror and</i>	
<i>Be Honest About What You See</i> . . . . .	157
CHAPTER EIGHT ★ Little Bighorn: Reno-Benteen Defense Site . . . . .	159
<i>Case Study:</i>	
<i>Rascal's Restaurant in Apple Valley, Minnesota</i> . . . . .	171
<i>Leadership Lesson Eight:</i>	
<i>Be Flexible Under Changing Circumstances</i> . . . . .	175

# SACRED GROUND

## **PART FIVE: SHOW ENERGY & PASSION**

CHAPTER NINE ★ Gettysburg: Little Round Top . . . . .	179
<i>Case Study: Harley-Davidson</i> . . . . .	191
<i>Leadership Lesson Nine: When All Else Fails,     Innovate and Lead the Charge.</i> . . . . .	196
CHAPTER TEN ★ Little Bighorn: Crazy Horse-Keogh Fight. . . . .	199
<i>Case Study: Google</i> . . . . .	212
<i>Leadership Lesson Ten: Care for Your People</i> . . . . .	217

## **PART SIX: MAKE GOOD DECISIONS**

CHAPTER ELEVEN ★ Gettysburg: Pickett's Charge. . . . .	221
<i>Case Study: Billy Beane and the Oakland A's</i> . . . . .	237
<i>Leadership Lesson Eleven: Use the Right Data</i> . . . . .	242
CHAPTER TWELVE ★ Little Bighorn: Last Stand Hill. . . . .	245
<i>Case Study: The Walt Disney Company.</i> . . . . .	264
<i>Leadership Lesson Twelve:     If the Situation Looks Familiar—Beware</i> . . . . .	269

---

<i>Conclusion.</i> . . . . .	271
<i>Afterword</i> . . . . .	275
<i>Appendix.</i> . . . . .	291
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	297
<i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .	301
<i>Index.</i> . . . . .	307



## *List of Maps*

1. Gettysburg: June 3–July 3, 1863, Lee Invades Pennsylvania
2. Gettysburg: July 1, 1863, Morning and Afternoon
3. Gettysburg: July 1, 1863, Late Evening
4. Gettysburg: July 2, 1863, Battle for Little Round Top, Late Afternoon
5. Gettysburg: July 2, 1863, Confederate Assault, Late Afternoon
6. Gettysburg: July 3, 1863, Pickett's Charge, Late Afternoon

- 
1. Little Bighorn: June 25, 1876, The Indian Village
  2. Little Bighorn: May–June 1876, Little Bighorn Campaign
  3. Little Bighorn: June 25, 1876, Custer's Approach to Medicine Tail Coulee, Reno's Retreat, Mid-Afternoon
  4. Little Bighorn: June 25–26, 1876, Reno-Benteen Defense Site
  5. Little Bighorn: June 25, 1876, Approach to Crazy Horse-Keogh Fight, Late Afternoon
  6. Little Bighorn: June 25, 1876, Custer's Advance to Last Stand Hill, Early Evening





## Foreword

When I first decided to participate in a leadership development experience centered on a visit to the battlefield of the Little Bighorn, during the late, hot summer of 2008, I had few expectations it would serve as one of the most important and meaningful learning experiences of my life.

Upon arrival at the airport for my flight to Montana, I even privately wondered, “What am I doing here?” Such a mindset and attitude is not normally the basis for a transformational learning experience, but throughout my life, I’ve often been surprised to receive some of the most valuable gifts of knowledge, wisdom, and insights when I least expect them. I was unaware of all that was possible when venturing onto hallowed and holy ground, but now I know. So I will tell you, if your mind is open, your own personal learning and leadership journey will be greatly enhanced by the book you are about to read, *Sacred Ground: Leadership Lessons from Gettysburg and the Little Bighorn*.

*Sacred Ground* is the companion volume to the Gettysburg and Little Bighorn seminars facilitated by my friend Jeff Appelquist, but the book also stands proudly on its own. This insightful, ambitious, and creative collection of learning lessons not only pulls from the magnificent history of two of the most well-known American battles, but also helps us fast-forward to applications and connections with some of today’s most successful leaders and organizations. I paraphrase a well-known quote that says, “He or she who does not know their history, is

## SACRED GROUND

doomed to repeat it.” The lessons from Gettysburg and the Little Bighorn are timeless gems available for us to examine today. We can learn from history, apply those experiences to modern-day challenges, and use our newfound knowledge to explore fresh and innovative ways to solve ongoing, as well as future, problems. We can pursue the greatest challenges that we each face—all with a higher degree of confidence, conviction, humility, and inclusiveness.

This wonderful book gives us enhanced perspective on the problems and issues we confront in the workplace today. The men and women who’ve come before us, perhaps unknowingly, gave their lives in order that their spirits and life-guiding principles might live on through us in smarter, more prosperous ways. Without a doubt, these lessons will inspire us to act in ways that will inspire others to follow our deeds in the future.

My experience of bonding and learning with my battlefield buddies in Montana will remain with me forever. Since the seminar, I have read many books on the subject of the Little Bighorn, I have participated in follow-up sessions, and I serve on an advisory board to further advance this unique experience. But my most meaningful moments occurred on the battlefield when tracing the various phases of the conflict and taking the time to debrief what happened and its relevance to me and my leadership style today.

My reading at the beautiful Indian Memorial of the moving words of the Sioux leader Ohiyesa—later known by his anglicized name of Charles Alexander Eastman—will serve for me as a lasting memory of the courage, spirit, and bravery of those who valiantly gave their lives. Immediately after I read Ohiyesa’s heartfelt words out loud, at the very end of our battlefield tour, our group experienced a sudden, cold, and sustained wind on what had been an extremely hot and still summer day. This amazing and mystical occurrence touched me deeply and will forever serve as a reminder that we are all connected, and that

## FOREWORD

our mutual life journeys always have been—and always will be—carefully intertwined.

I believe we all have an obligation to live each day to its fullest and in peace. We have an obligation to be the best leaders that we can be. We have an obligation to be citizens not just of America, or whatever nation we call home, but of the global community. We have an obligation to our children, and to future generations. The lessons from *Sacred Ground* can guide us in this quest.

The Sioux chief Ohiyesa said it well: “... as an ideal, we live and will live, not only in the splendor of our past, the poetry of our legends and art, not only in the interfusion of our blood with yours, and in our faithful adherence to the ideals of American citizenship, but in the living heart of the nation.”

—Herschel R. Herndon—

*Vice President Multicultural Relations,  
Diversity and Urban Market Development*

*Best Buy Company, Inc.  
September 2009*





# Introduction

## MOMENT OF TRUTH

*“If you don’t find more Indians in that valley than you ever saw together, you can hang me.”*

—Mitch Boyer—

He was beyond weary after having spent more than twenty-four hours in the saddle. He had ridden nearly seventy miles to get to this point and cherished the thought of a few hours rest before duty called again. The night was black and cool, with countless stars high and bright in the sky. It was 2:30 a.m. When the scouting party finally unsaddled horses at the base of a hill beneath juniper and pine trees, he dropped exhausted to the ground and immediately fell into a deep sleep. Lieutenant Charles Varnum was a good soldier, a twenty-seven-year-old West Pointer serving in the Seventh U.S. Cavalry Regiment. That unit’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, had thought enough of Varnum’s abilities to appoint him chief of scouts. At dawn’s first light, fellow guide Mitch Boyer shook Varnum out of his blissful slumber and beckoned him to follow. It was June 25, 1876, in the vast, rugged reaches of southeast Montana Territory. An immense Sioux Indian encampment, the largest Boyer had ever seen, lay just visible in the distance to the west.

## SACRED GROUND

Boyer, Varnum and two of Custer's Crow Indian scouts scrambled through the tall buffalo grass up a steep precipice to the high point known as the Crow's Nest. They looked down on the gap that bridged the divide between the Rosebud and Little Bighorn Rivers, at the Cha Tish, or Wolf Mountains. They were now in Crow country, and the Crow's Nest—named for the bird and not the tribe—had been used for years, perhaps centuries, as an observation post. This elevated ridge offered excellent, panoramic views both east and west. From this position, in the clear morning air, the Crow scouts had spotted the huge village, fifteen miles away to the west in the valley of the Little Bighorn. When Varnum, whom the Indians called Peaked Face, got to the top, they pointed westward. They could see the smoke of hundreds of morning campfires and, beyond that, an enormous herd of ponies.

Varnum's eyes were tired and sore from lack of sleep and his long ride in hard conditions. Try as he might, even through a telescope, his blurry vision prevented him from seeing what the others told him was there. The multilingual Boyer, who was half-Sioux and half-French, interpreted as the Crows coached Varnum, "Don't look for horses, look for worms. At that distance horses look like worms crawling on the ground." Varnum still failed the test, but he decided to trust his very capable professional colleagues. It was around 5:00 a.m. He wrote a note to Custer and sent two Arikara Indian scouts to find the Seventh Cavalry and its commander. This would not be difficult, as the smoke from the Seventh's morning fires rose lazily and very visibly in the distance eight miles to the east. The Crow scouts with Varnum could not contain their irritation and contempt. The Sioux could easily determine exactly where they were. Surely such carelessness would give their position away.

The one the Indians knew as "Son of the Morning Star" received the news at his bivouac at 7:30 a.m. Custer mounted his horse, Dandy, bareback and rode around the camp to alert his officers that the men should be ready to step off in half an hour. Custer's favorite scout Bloody Knife predicted anxiously, "We'll find enough Sioux to keep

## INTRODUCTION

us fighting two or three days.” Custer replied confidently, “I guess we’ll get through them in one day.” His plan was to cross the divide early on June 25, put the regiment in hiding, then conduct a thorough reconnaissance of the village and surrounding terrain. He would attack on the morning of June 26.

Custer now rode on ahead to the Crow’s Nest. Gazing west through a spyglass, he experienced much the same frustration as Varnum. “Well I’ve got about as good eyes as anybody,” complained Custer, “and I can’t see any village, Indians or anything else.” Out of frustration, Boyer said to Custer, “If you don’t find more Indians in that valley than you ever saw together, you can hang me.” Custer replied, anger rising in his voice, “It would do a damned sight of good to hang you now, wouldn’t it.” This was only the second time Varnum had ever heard Custer use profanity, proof of the commander’s general exasperation with the situation.

Finally, through field glasses, after one more careful scan, Custer paused. He saw the dark formation of the gigantic pony herd kicking up dust. He knew what he was up against. But even when Varnum alerted him that the scouts had seen a pair of Indians a mile away, and also a small party of warriors watching them from a ridgeline in the distance, Custer intended to stick with his original plan. The frightened scouts vehemently disagreed and pressed him hard for an immediate attack. They were convinced the Sioux horsemen had seen the Seventh’s campfires and would alert the village. The element of surprise would be gone. Custer pondered their advice as he continued to look out over the enormous expanse of terrain to his front. He was inclined to listen to his scouts. Shortly, his brother and subordinate officer Captain Tom Custer rode up with news that the regiment’s back trail had been discovered as well. There were Indians to the front and Indians to the rear.

For George Armstrong Custer, this was his moment of truth as a decision maker. He knew he was outnumbered. Should he stick with his original plan, which involved being careful in his assessment of the

## SACRED GROUND

situation, allowing his men and horses to rest, and attacking in due time? Or had circumstances now changed so dramatically that he must throw caution to the wind and move immediately? He had been a great hero of the American Civil War. Over four years of intense combat, he had made decisions quickly time and again and been rewarded for his audacity. He became the most famous Indian fighter of them all after the war and, again, had always acted boldly. Now, the fate of not only his entire command, but his place in history rested on this choice. He was a national figure, and there were many people who viewed him as a potential future candidate for the presidency. He could not afford a mistake. What decision would he make?

---

As leaders, we have all faced moments of truth throughout our professional careers. The stakes for us, most likely, have not ever been as high as those that confronted Custer and his Seventh Cavalry. Nevertheless, important decisions directly impacting the success or failure of our teams and organizations have sometimes rested in our hands. Is it possible that we could actually learn from historical examples how to make better decisions? Is it possible to use lessons from history to improve in other dimensions of our leadership as well? I believe the answer is a resounding yes.

---

## INTRODUCTION

### **WHAT CAN HISTORY TEACH US ABOUT LEADERSHIP?**

*“History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”*

—Mark Twain—

I love history. I have had a passionate interest in history since early childhood. I read lots of history books and have wanted to write one for as long as I can remember. But while this is undoubtedly a history book, it is not primarily so. This is a book about leadership, with history as the framework.

Let me explain, as I have been on a journey. Since the fall of 2007 I have taken twelve teams of approximately 180 business leaders to the Gettysburg and the Little Bighorn battlefields. We have had incredible experiences together while studying these momentous events through the lens of individual leadership and team dynamics. When I was employed as a human resources generalist at the Best Buy Corporation, the company was gracious enough to encourage me to develop my idea. The program was called “Learning Through History.” Best Buy also, amazingly, allowed me to form my own limited liability company for purposes of marketing the program externally. This I have done with all my energy since I left Best Buy voluntarily in February of 2009. I am an entrepreneur at heart. It makes me profoundly happy to pursue what I love and make a living at it. I am eternally grateful to my “angel investor,” the Best Buy Corporation.

At some point in this wonderful journey the light bulb lit up for me. I think I just woke up one morning and it came to me. I decided to write about the experience. What struck me again and again, based on personal observation and abundant feedback, was the power of history to teach. The lessons learned from these battles are very timely

## SACRED GROUND

and highly relevant for leaders right now, especially in the tumultuous times in which we live.

These questions should sound familiar: How do we manage through profound change? How can we motivate our people in chaotic circumstances? How do we make good decisions despite imperfect information? How can we communicate more effectively? How do we see things from another person's point of view? How can we understand another culture in a global economy? How will we win or even survive in a highly competitive and uncertain world? The challenges leaders faced long ago are fundamentally the same as those that leaders confront today.

Based on a desire to get at these timeless challenges, we structure the seminar around a handful of important leadership dimensions. We will do the same in this book. These dimensions do not represent an exhaustive list or the final word on leadership or teams. There are as many ways of going about being a successful leader as there are successful leaders. This much was true in the 1800s, just as it is today. Nevertheless, outstanding leaders both past and present seem to consistently demonstrate these skills:

1. Great leaders **Create Common Purpose;**
2. Great leaders **Build Strong Relationships and Trust;**
3. Great leaders **Communicate Clearly and Share Information;**
4. Great leaders **Seek Self-Knowledge and Learning;**
5. Great leaders **Show Energy and Passion;**
6. Great leaders **Make Good Decisions.**

One of my favorite customers is Fresenius Medical Care. They are typical of many of the groups that have accompanied me to the battlefield. Fresenius is the world's largest integrated provider of prod-

## INTRODUCTION

ucts and services for people who are undergoing kidney dialysis. The Physician Strategies and Market Development Group from Fresenius, led by my friend Brian Gauger, has sent two teams to Gettysburg and one to Montana. Brian is one of those terrific leaders—of whom there are not enough—who recognizes that even in a tough economic environment he needs to invest in and develop his people. Brian has said, “These are the very individuals who are going to get us through the challenging times. We need to take care of them.” He has brought members of his team from both the field and senior management in areas such as acquisitions, joint ventures, and market development. They are a very sharp bunch.

When a team such as Fresenius arrives on-site at the battlefield, we spend an initial half-day going through a series of preparatory exercises. We talk about the history of what happened there. We spend the entire next day touring the battlefield. We always hope for—and usually get—a warm and sunny day (knock on wood). We move from station to station in more or less chronological fashion. We do a reading from a historical source at each site, and then discuss the application of historical lessons to modern leadership and team challenges. The folks from Fresenius love to argue with each other. They get into it, but we are all usually smiling by the end of the conversation. We ensure we have at least one significant lesson learned from each location on the field. At the end of both the first and second days in Gettysburg we go out to dinner at restaurants that are on the National Register of Historic Places. They were private homes during the battle—some people say they are now haunted—but have been beautifully restored and are nationally renowned eateries. We have fun.

We spend a final half-day assessing what we learned together. We discuss what we saw and experienced, and how we might apply it to our own workplaces. We complete some exercises that provide us tools and action items to take back.

We also commit to a series of four follow-up Sustain and Build meetings (we were going to call them Build and Sustain meetings but

## SACRED GROUND

then they would have been BS meetings and everyone has enough of those already). We conduct these conversations over the course of a year. We want to make sure the experience becomes more than just a one-time, event-based occurrence (everyone has had enough of those as well) with no lasting impact. The idea is to build on the powerful and memorable on-site adventure in a way that creates change and produces tangible business results.

The Fresenius team has spent entire days together, reviewing what we learned and how it applies. They have been especially focused on building their cross-functional relationships and better communication. They have made good progress in both areas. Brian Gauger says, “The follow-on work was key and helped me make several critical decisions about my organization. We saw an immediate improvement in business outcomes helping to drive our growth and leadership goals.”

Despite the express focus on practical leadership skills and my assertion that this is not primarily a history book, there will be plenty of history here. You have already had a brief glimpse. I have gotten my fix (for the time being) in doing the research and writing. I have tried to focus on people, rather than dates, chronologies, and all the other things that made history so boring for many of us in school.

I regard history at its best as one unending, frequently unforgettable story about people who lived and breathed, and sometimes accomplished amazing things under great duress. While not everyone loves history, everyone loves a great story. And stories from the past still have power to inform our lives in the present. While history is undoubtedly the foundation, this book is written for today’s business leader.

The book is divided into six parts that track our key dimensions. There are two chapters in each part, one on Gettysburg and one on the Little Bighorn. Our process will be to discuss the two battles in parallel fashion. We will move from site to site at each field just as we do in the seminar. After the battle narratives, we add a more current case study

## INTRODUCTION

from the world of business to each chapter. I hope these short business stories help illuminate the enduring nature of the leadership lessons. Within the framework of the broader leadership dimension, each chapter ends with a specific leadership lesson. The book concludes with an argument for the relevance of history and a look at the battlefields today.

Frankly, you can learn everything you really need to know from this book by just looking at the leadership lessons that close each chapter—twelve chapters with twelve simple lessons. But you should dig deeper, because even easy concepts are often difficult to execute. By exploring further, you will see that the stories from history are fascinating, the parallels memorable, and the principles enduring. You may even be influenced to change the way you think, lead, and do business.

Finally, I characterize this as “one man’s odyssey, with 180 of his special friends, to two sacred places in American history.” For me these battlefields are as holy as any shrine, religious, historical, or otherwise, in the world. I have a special, other-worldly sensation when I visit them. I do not have adequate words to describe what happens. I feel electricity in the air. My wife asked me if I would tire of the routine of visiting these places again and again, but I said no, not ever. I am honored and humbled to be there, each and every time. I see something different and new, each and every time.

I have deeply enjoyed sharing the experience of this hallowed ground with many smart, energetic, perceptive people. They are good leaders and good citizens. They want to understand our past and figure out ways to make meaningful connections with their own busy lives. I believe they have taught me more than I have taught them. The leadership lessons presented ultimately have come from them and not from me. We have learned together, been inspired together, laughed together, and cried together. We have pondered the meaning of life and the mystery of death together. Perhaps most important, we have hoped for the future of our children together. It has been an amazing journey.

