

Teaching Lessons in Leadership to High School Social Studies Students by Examining Incidents in the Life of Ulysses S. Grant: A Guide for Teachers

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Abstract

Ulysses S. Grant was the 18th President of the United States. But he is best remembered as the Union general who won the American Civil War. This article is intended to help high school social studies teachers teach valuable lessons in leadership by discussing incidents from Grant's life with their students.

Key Words: Ulysses S. Grant, Leadership, Bureaucrats, Subordinates, Confederacy, Performance, Vision

Three Lessons From Grant's Formative Years

When Grant arrived at West Point, he saw that he had been registered under the name of Ulysses S. Grant, but his first name was Hiram not Ulysses and he did not have a middle initial. When the young Grant tried to explain that the name on the register needed to be changed, he was told that if he wanted to attend West Point, he would have to attend as Ulysses S. not Hiram Grant. The lesson here is that leaders need to ensure that their subordinates do not act like bureaucrats, but instead recognize that an organization's rules and regulations are designed for the guidance of intelligent human beings who exercise good judgment and use common sense.

At West Point, Grant distinguished himself as one of the finest horseman of his day. At his class graduation exercises he set a jumping record that stood for 25 years. Yet instead of assigning Grant to the cavalry, the army started him out as an infantry officer. Future leaders need a wide variety of assignments so they can learn all the facets of the organization and become expert in many of them. Pigeonholing them in the one area they excel in lessens their developmental opportunities and future usefulness.

Grant served as a regimental quartermaster during the Mexican War. This required him to use mules to transport the regiment's property, and Grant found dealing with Mexican mules thoroughly exasperating. But much as he was tempted to Grant never cursed his mules. The best leaders hold their tempers in check and never use foul language.

Ten Lessons from the Civil War

Grant understood that the most important job of first line supervisors was to train the people that reported to them. Like all good leaders he treated mistakes, not as reasons to punish, but as opportunities for additional training.

However, one lesson that Grant learned the hard way occurred when Grant made the mistake of giving Colonel Rodney Mason, who had run away at the battle of Shiloh, a chance to redeem himself by commanding a garrison at Clarksville, Tennessee.

When a band of Confederate soldiers showed up and demanded Mason surrender, he promptly complied. Leaders need to recognize the difference between a single lapse in judgment and a potential pattern of unacceptable conduct.

The best leaders understand the importance of making allies of those who don't report to them. Grant included his naval counterparts in his planning process, and he was unstinting in his praise of their efforts, thereby insuring their future cooperation. Without the help of the navy, Grant could not have captured the Confederate fortress at Vicksburg, Mississippi, effectively splitting the Confederacy in half.

Chattanooga, Tennessee was being besieged by Confederate forces when Grant arrived to take command. He quickly devised and successfully executed a plan to drive the Confederates from their positions overlooking the city. Leaders need to develop the operational plans required for their organizations to accomplish their mission and then oversee the implementation of those plans.

Grant was one of the first Union generals to organize African-American regiments, and even though the army of his day was segregated and there was systemic racism, Grant ordered his subordinates to mould the new regiments into effective fighting forces and to remove prejudice against them. Good leaders are color and gender blind. To them the only thing that matters is the quality of a person's performance.

When Grant learned he was to be promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and placed in command of all the Union armies, he wrote that he had been honored enough; what he craved was not another promotion but success in bringing the war to an end. The best leaders don't try to tie their performance to personal reward. Instead they concentrate on the contribution they can make, and the service they can render to their organization.

Grant, like all good leaders, understood that there were certain steps that needed to be taken in order to arrive at a good decision. In planning for the campaign that led to the capture of the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, the surrender of all Confederate forces and the end of the war, Grant first identified the information he would need. He then gathered the necessary input from his staff, and he insured that he would receive honest feedback by showing respect for the views of his subordinates.

There are no perfect leaders. While Grant was an excellent leader, he did make mistakes, and in war mistakes can be terrible. After ordering an attack at Cold harbor, Virginia that was repulsed with heavy casualties, Grant admitted he had made a mistake and took full responsibility for the failure of the attack and the ensuing loss of lives. Good leaders accept the consequences for their actions. They don't try to cover them up or lay blame on someone else.

After the failed attack at Cold Harbor, Grant realized that continued frontal assaults would be too costly, and his plans would have to be changed. Grant developed an alternate plan. Leaders need to recognize that plans may go awry and when that happens, instead of abandoning their goal, they need to develop alternate plans.

The American Civil War saw the application of several new technologies. Grant made extensive use of the telegraph to transmit orders to and receive reports from his subordinates. To stay ahead leaders, need to invest in research and development.

Two Final Post War Lessons

When the war ended Grant, who had proposed generous terms for the surrender of the Confederate armies, was already beginning the task of helping to rebuild a unified nation. Good leaders understand that all successes are temporary unless you keep building upon them. The best leaders never rest upon their laurels.

It was said of Grant that the orders he gave were clear and concise, and that you never needed to read them twice to know what he wanted, by when he wanted it, and most important of all, why he wanted it. Great leaders, like Ulysses S. Grant, are men and women of vision. Grant's vision was for the United States to become a great nation with peace, happiness and prosperity. Grant's single-mindedness of purpose and leadership abilities brought him victory in the Civil War and set the United States on the path to greatness that he had envisioned.

Individual Student Assignment

Write two one-page papers and prepare presentations to give to the class on the leader you most admire and the leader you least admire. Remember, society has all kinds of leaders. Feel free to choose your leaders from any field (political, spiritual, military, academic, corporate, social activism, etc.) and from any period in history. Your papers and presentations should give a history of the leaders. It doesn't have to be comprehensive but we should understand who they are (were), how they became leaders, the major challenges they faced, their accomplishments and failures, how the public perceived them, what, if any, lasting impact they made on society, and why you personally admire/dislike them. Be sure to explain your position clearly and base your opinions on facts (not on other opinions).

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