

Leadership, History, Insights: Battlefield and Naval Academy Perspectives Change the Way School Business Officials Lead

By Nicole Verardi

Right now, students are stepping onto buses, raising their hands to answer questions, and feeling safe in classrooms. It's just a regular day . . . made possible by school business leaders' behind-the-scenes work. Drawn by that responsibility, more than 40 school business officials honed their skills as leaders in education by participating in the 2008 Eagle Institute, held July 31–August 1 in Annapolis, Maryland, and sponsored by AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company.

Leadership 101

Led by Jeff McCausland, Ph.D., retired colonel and professor of international law and diplomacy at the Penn State Dickinson School of Law, this group of esteemed professionals and emerging leaders began with Leadership 101, exploring what it means to be a leader. Insights from Will Rogers and Colin Powell illustrated the difference between management and leadership. For example, leaders cultivate vision and motivation, whereas managers focus on meeting day-to-day goals.

During this discussion, McCausland noted that “vision without resources is a fairy tale”—a truth school business officials know well. Leaders must create realistic visions.

Participants also discussed the importance of identifying the stakeholders and communicating with them to ensure that they understand that vision.

It's said that the best lessons come from making mistakes, a maxim proved by key players in the American Civil War: Confederate President Jefferson Davis and President Abraham Lincoln. With his prestigious background, Davis might be thought the better leader, but Lincoln's failures might have better prepared him to face the challenges with the threat of defeat.

Lessons from the Battlefield

The next morning, attendees traveled to the Antietam Battlefield in Maryland to experience September 17, 1862, the bloodiest day in American history. Colonel Tom Vossler, U.S. Army (Ret.), brought to life the thunderous cannons, smoky air, and bravery of the day, while McCausland related the leadership challenges to the everyday work of school business officials.

Vossler set the stage for this Civil War battle, explaining that morale was high for the Confederate side, as General Robert E. Lee planned to invade the North by winning this battle. On the Union side, soldiers were still recovering from Second Manassas. Their leader, General



George McClellan, had been reinstated in command only two days before this battle and was still at odds with President Lincoln.

By walking along landmarks such as Bloody Lane and Burnside's Bridge, these school business officials captured the essence of the struggle—and the leadership challenges—that the leaders faced at Antietam almost 150 years ago.

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That night at dinner, participants divided into groups to discuss these leadership challenges, how they rang true with them in their current positions, and how the day's experience changed their understanding of leadership.

For example, from Union General Ambrose Burnside's failure to cross Antietam Creek when ordered by McClellan, participants learned that leaders must take some risks or else miss opportunities. Unwilling to take a risk, Burnside delayed leading his 12,000 men across the creek—a creek that his men could have easily forded to meet the fewer than 500 Confederates on the other side.

Several other points resonated with the participants:

- **Make decisions quickly.** Although accountability can compel school officials to take their time when making decisions, the quick, off-the-cuff choices we make are some of our best. Trust your team, make your decisions, and accept responsibility for errors.
- **Create passion in your team, translating vision into action.** To get everyone on board, leaders must understand and believe in their goals, just as the soldiers needed to feel passion to fight.
- **When losing, keep fighting.** The day after this stalemate battle, even with the casualties suffered, Lee would not retreat. He said, “If McClellan wants to fight in the morning, I will give him battle again.” As the weight of standardized test scores and accountability increase, school leaders should not give up; instead, continue to keep your teams focused on the ultimate goal of student achievement.
- **Stay in touch with your team.** McClellan commanded from a house away from the line of fire, but Lee rallied his men's support in person. Because school business officials work in administration buildings away from the day-to-day life of the school, they can feel isolated. It's important to get another perspective—leave the office to visit classrooms, talk with teachers, and get to know the team.

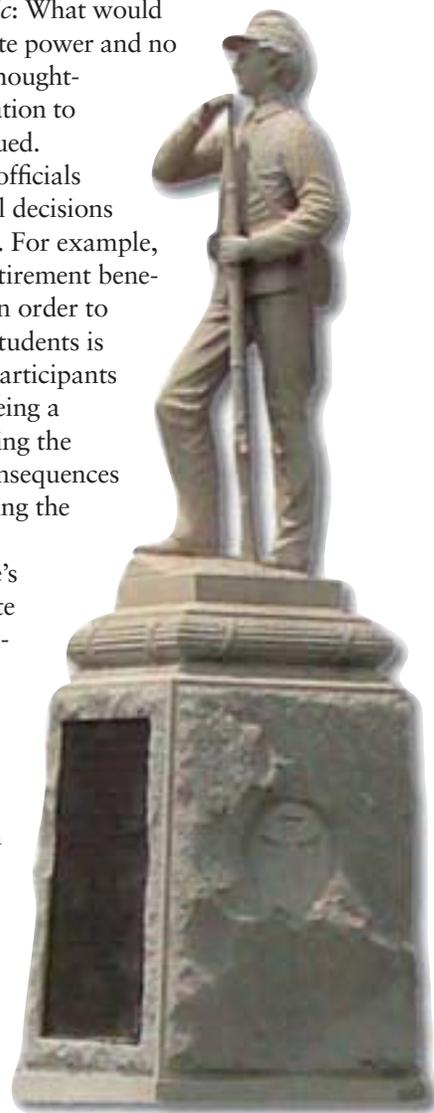
- **Share what winning looks like with your team.** For President Lincoln, winning meant defeating the Confederate Army at Antietam to end the war. McClellan, though, defined winning as keeping Lee from advancing on Northern soil. Don't assume that the people you lead share your definition of success; spell it out for them and create clear goals.
- **Recognize that small changes make an enormous difference in organizations.** The minor advance in technology for ammunition at Antietam affected the outcome of the battle. In school districts, small changes like new retirement plans or new textbooks make a difference. Don't overlook these small differences that can lead to big changes.

Leadership from a Naval Perspective

Thursday morning at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, participants stepped back again, this time to their college days. Patricia Cook, Ph.D., visiting assistant professor who teaches philosophy to the midshipmen, posed the question from the story of Gyges' magic ring in Plato's *The Republic*: What would you do with absolute power and no accountability? A thought-provoking conversation to define morality ensued.

School business officials discussed the moral decisions they face every day. For example, a decision to cut retirement benefits for employees in order to meet the needs of students is difficult to make. Participants debated whether being a leader meant carrying the burden of those consequences and still championing the greater good.

Next, Penn State's John Park, associate director of management development programs and services, engaged participants in a presentation about organization strategic planning. He energetically dispelled the myth that strategic planning is a boring process that results in a document that collects



dust on the shelf. Park showed how plans coordinate action and can help achieve results.

Vice Academic Dean Michael Halbig presented the Naval Academy's strategic plan. He shared the academy's mission to develop midshipmen who are selfless, inspirational, proficient, innovative, articulate, adaptable, and professional. Halbig also gave an overview of the school's institutional effectiveness assessment model that stresses continued assessments. Participants concluded the day with a tour of the academy.

Parting Reflections

On the final morning, participants learned how to help aspiring students gain admission to the Naval Academy. Then, McCausland related the current situation in Iraq to leadership. He emphasized the importance of questioning data and discovering embedded assumptions in order to succeed.

“ASBO’s Eagle Institute is a tremendous learning forum to foster



growth among rising leaders in public education,” said Bernadette Mitchell, vice president of AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company. “I was impressed by the high-quality speakers and the development program that ASBO put together. AXA Equitable is proud to be a small part of this incredible conference.”

Of the experience, participants noted the power of learning from one another and from history. From sharing this experience, they developed camaraderie and a network that will continue as they take these lessons to their districts to lead their own teams. “Your vision doesn’t have to change,” explained Mary Lagnando, 2007 Eagle Award recipient. “It’s how you reach that vision that changes. You adapt to reach your goal.”

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