

An Example of Personal Openness in Leadership

This occurred a year and a half after the battle of Yorktown. A popular misconception is that the Revolutionary War ended at that battle. Though active hostilities had ended, The War continued to drag on. The Continental Army was becoming increasingly rebellious. Many of the troops hadn't been paid in two years. Their promised pensions were not forthcoming. The troops and its officer corps contemplated overthrowing the Continental Congress and installing a military government. On the Ides of March in 1783, dozens of officers, representing every company in the army, met in a log hut to vote on taking this action when George Washington suddenly and unexpectedly walked in. He gave a speech denouncing the rebellious course they were on. But it wasn't the speech that carried the day, it was the Leadership Talk at the end of the speech. Witnesses report that Washington's speech left many officers unconvinced, and when he was finished, there was angry muttering among them. To bolster his case, the general pulled out a letter he recently received from a member of the Continental Congress. As he began reading, his usual confident air gave way to hesitancy. Then, unexpectedly, he drew out a spectacle case from his pocket. Few officers had ever seen him put on spectacles. Usually a severely formal man, he said, in a voice softened with apology: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country."

The deep, human, emotional power of that moment electrified the officers. Here was their commander who had never taken a furlough during his eight years of command, who had faced storms of musketry fire, who through his daring and intelligence had kept the Army intact in what most of the world thought was a lost cause, here was George Washington modestly asking his officers to bear with him in an all-too-human failing. It was an astonishing turning point.

As Maj. Samuel Shaw, who was present, put it in his journal, "There was something so natural, so unaffected in this appeal as rendered it superior to the most studied oratory. It forced its way to the heart, and you might see sensibility moisten every eye."

After Washington left the hut, the officers unanimously voted to "continue to have unshaken confidence in the justice of the Congress and their country" The result was that the Continental Army disbanded without incident and thereby set in motion the relatively peaceful events that led to the creation of the Constitution.

Source: The Leadership Talk: <http://www.actionleadership.com/articles/0017.html>

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