



Reprinted from: Silicon Valley North August 2000, page 24



## Leadership Lessons from the American War of Independence

**Mel Gibson's** latest movie, *The Patriot*, features one of the unsung heroes of the American revolutionary war, **Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben**. The baron was a Prussian military leader recruited by **George Washington** to be the drillmaster of the continental army. Facing a well-trained army of British conscripts and Hessian mercenaries, von Steuben turned a ragtag collection of farmers and shopkeepers into the officer corps that led the Americans to victory. Those lessons have relevance today.

General Washington created a level playing field by bringing in a skilled outsider who knew the enemy and what it would take to defeat them. From von Steuben to **Lafayette**, Washington sought individuals who could make a difference in the outcome of the war. Could you do the same for your company? In today's hyper-competitive environment, business is war! You put your job on the line to help your company beat the competition, gain market share and become the market leader. Washington couldn't have achieved victory with second-rate people and neither can you.

*Consider the following 10 traits when you need to hire the very best:*

- 1. Communication skills.** Must be far above average. Fuzzy writing and clumsy speaking skills are rarely indicative of sharp thinking, whereas clarity and conciseness of expression are. Colloquial expressions may work well on the factory floor but are unlikely to impress your customers or board of directors.
- 2. Leadership and change-agent skills.** Reject any candidate who believes everything is fine just the way it is and wants to become a valued team player. Unless you're hiring followers, it's far better to find the person who wants to lead the team in search of a better way. "Fire in the belly" is how many of our clients describe this.
- 3. Action oriented.** They cannot be afraid to make tough decisions. In business, acts of omission cause more damage than acts of commission.
- 4. Leads by example.** They are able to manage effectively and blend the intricate personalities and quirks of talented people by setting ambitious goals and motivating others to participate in achieving them. Leadership is never limited to the corner office on the top floor. In the R&D lab, it motivates lone-wolf scientists and engineers to work together to design a faster chip. In the field, it motivates the sales force to take no prisoners in the battle for marketplace supremacy.
- 5. Global perspective.** Today's executive should be well-traveled, multilingual, aware of worldwide political and economic trends, comfortable in foreign cultures and aware of local business customs. They should bring a global perspective to the job.

**6. Broad-based experience.** While promotion from within was once a well and widely regarded practice, many organizations today realize that corporate inbreeding results in management that knows only one way of doing things. A recent study found that fewer than two out of five top executives are company lifers. The manager who has thrived in differing industries and corporate cultures not only brings a range of experience to the table but is also likely to be flexible enough to adapt to your organization as well.

**7. Fill a gap in the management mix.** General Washington knew he needed an expert in close-order drill. Good hockey coaches know their relative offensive, defensive and goal-keeping strengths and make trades accordingly. Likewise, smart corporate managers know their organization's strengths and seek to complement, not replicate them, when hiring.

**8. Range of past assignments bodes well for future promote-ability.** The person who gets pigeonholed into a functional specialty, such as marketing, product development or PR, has not been earmarked by his or her employer as a candidate for high-level promotion. Succession planning depends on giving the line managers some staff experience and vice versa, so that someday they are truly ready for general management.

**9. Fill the next job up the corporate ladder, with proper seasoning.** All too often, companies consider only the demands of the current job. Why hire someone you can't promote? The upwardly mobile manager eases the burden of succession planning and improves your return on personnel investment.

**10. Thinking of tomorrow's technology needs.** From order processing to factory scheduling, from pricing models to product design, and from boardroom presentations to Internet marketing, computers enhance a company's ability to make informed decisions, achieve more predictable end results, optimize efficiency and beat the competition. Your executives must embrace technology and be on top of new products.

Ultimately each company must decide for itself what attributes will lead to on-the-job success, since the employer, not the recruiter, will be stuck with the end result, but no matter what your industry, hire the individual who will give you a leg up on your competitors. In the presence of Hessian mercenaries, do as Washington did and hire a Prussian general.

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