

## The Un-Comfort Zone II



by **Robert Evans Wilson, Jr.**

### Thrown into the Driver's Seat

On June 29, 1863, a 23-year-old First Lieutenant received an unexpected promotion. The freckle-faced, strawberry blonde, who graduated at the bottom of his class at West Point, was elevated directly to the rank of Brigadier General in the Union Army. He completely skipped over the traditional ranks of Captain, Major, and Colonel in between. As you can imagine, such a promotion was met with skepticism, dismay, and envy by his former peers and superiors, especially at a time when the South was winning against the North during the American Civil War.

Major General Alfred Pleasonton, who promoted the boy, saw his gamble put to the test just four days later in the Battle of Gettysburg. The young general was put in charge of the Michigan Cavalry and tasked with keeping Confederate General Jeb Stuart from attacking the Union Army's rear.

Was he up to the task? Could he keep that dubious star so many wanted removed? Motivated by the desire to prove himself, George Armstrong Custer, his gleaming saber outstretched in front of him, led the cavalry charge and held the Union line. His successful leadership served as a crucial contribution to the battle, which was the turning point in the North winning the war.

When leadership is thrust upon us, many of us are motivated to rise to the occasion. Sometimes, however, leadership must rise in a vacuum. What motivates us to become leaders when there are none?

A few years ago, five friends and I went white-water rafting for the very first time. We went on the upper Ocoee River in Tennessee, where the rapids are rated class four. Not exactly the best choice for beginners, but we had a competent guide who gave us plenty of instructions on when and how to

paddle.

Halfway through our trip, we went over a small waterfall. When our rubber raft hit the bottom, it bent in the middle and folded up like a book. When it sprung back apart, our guide was catapulted from the boat and landed several feet behind us. As our leaderless raft sped forward, getting further and further away from our guide, five of us thought, "Uh, oh. What are we going to do!"

Before we could panic, my friend Bill started barking commands, "Left side four strokes! Right side two strokes!" With great relief we followed his orders, and within minutes he had us safely out of the rushing white water and into the calmer water by the riverbank where our guide was able to catch up to us.

A leadership role can jump-start motivation. I have found volunteering for leadership roles at work and for non-profit organizations to be self-motivating. Back in the early 1990s, I had a particularly bad year. My mother passed away, my wife lost a baby, a business venture failed, and I had a falling out with my best friend. Needless to say, I was in a funk and seriously needed something to move me out of it.

That's when I learned my community association needed a new president. It was a huge job with a two-year commitment requiring fund-raising, event planning, managing several committees, and supervising dozens of volunteers. It consumed tons of my time, but it also taught me I could do more in a day than I ever knew. During that same two-year

period I launched two new businesses, both of which became success stories.

As a manager, you can motivate your employees (or your volunteers) by giving them a mantle of leadership. Suddenly he or she will no longer be just another disaffected cog in the wheel. With a position of responsibility, those persons will be empowered to do more and be more. Sure, it may require a greater effort on your part, but you will challenge their minds, expand their abilities, and imbue them with a sense of accomplishment.

*Robert*

**Robert is a motivational speaker and humorist. He works with companies that want to be more competitive and with people who want to think like innovators.**

**For more information on Robert's programs, visit:**

**[www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com](http://www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com)  
or contact him via e-mail at:**

**[editorial@worldwidedrillingresource.com](mailto:editorial@worldwidedrillingresource.com)**



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