The Charge of the Light Brigade, 1854

“In the 1850’s, long-simmering disputes over control of resources and holy places in Eastern Europe finally erupted into war centered around the Crimean Peninsula. Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire were allied against the Russian Empire. On October 25, 1854, the Light Brigade, a cavalry of almost 600 men, knowingly rode directly into a valley ringed on three sides by enemy troops. They were massacred by inescapable enemy fire. The Charge of the Light Brigade is still taught to military students and historians for its timeless and tragic lesson on the importance of interpersonal relationships and clear communications, and even today its lessons are applicable across all hazardous industries.

The Battle of Balaclava

In October 1854, the Anglo-French-Turkish alliance besieged the port and fortress of Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula, Russia’s principal naval base on the Black Sea. The Causeway Heights and the Woronzov road leading to the town of Balaclava, just outside Sevastopol, served as a main supply and communication line for the British army, and their Ottoman Turkish allies had been engaged in assembling heavy defenses of this important position. Seizing a vulnerable moment, the Russian army attacked and drove the Turkish army back; the retreating Turks left behind much of their weapons and heavy armament. Guns were valuable spoils of war and capturing the enemy’s weapons often served as a sign of victory.

From his vantage point above the valley, Lord Raglan, the commander of the British army, could see that the Russian army was trying to remove the valuable Turkish weapons from the Causeway Heights. Raglan’s subordinate, the Earl of Lucan, who was in charge of the British cavalry, was situated elsewhere in the valley and did not see the Russian attempt to remove the weapons.
Bad Orders

Raglan sent two orders to Lucan. The first stated “Cavalry to advance and take advantage of any opportunity to recover the Heights. They will be supported by the infantry which have been ordered to advance on two fronts.” Accordingly, Lucan moved the Light Brigade into the North valley, while Raglan observed from his bird’s eye position. Shortly following the troop movement, Raglan dictated a second order: “Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns. Troop horse artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate.” This order was sent via horseback with Captain Edward Nolan, a respected war veteran and cavalry tactician. Lucan received the order from Nolan with some confusion, as his position did not allow him to view the valley in full. When he questioned Nolan, the Captain delivered a scathing reply: “There, my Lord, is your enemy; there are your guns” and dramatically swept his arm outwards to indicate where Lucan should move his troops. Nolan’s sweeping gesture appeared to indicate not the Causeway where the Russians were attempting to move the captured Turkish guns, but the mass of Russian artillery in a redoubt at the end of the valley, around a mile away. Lucan, offended and embarrassed by Nolan’s actions, apparently chose not to question Nolan further and readied his troops for battle.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

The Earl of Cardigan was the commander of one of Lucan’s cavalry units, a brigade of light cavalry comprised of lancers, dragoons and hussars. Cardigan and Lucan were brothers-in-law with a long history of mutual animosity. When Cardigan received his orders, he warned Lucan that the valley was surrounded by hostile troops. Lucan replied “I know it, but Lord Raglan will have it. We have no choice but to obey.”

The Earl of Cardigan thus led the Light Brigade into the enemy valley, while Lucan followed leading a second brigade of heavy cavalry composed of dragoons and guards. Cardigan’s troops bravely advanced into the south valley in the direction that Nolan had pointed. Raglan could only watch in horror as they passed up the Causeway (where he had intended for them to go) and instead advanced down into the Russian-occupied valley in the direction indicated by Nolan. Quickly after the mistake was made, Nolan was seen rushing across the front of the Light Brigade, passing directly in front of Cardigan. Some suggest that he realized the mistake and was trying to correct it. History will never know his intention as he was killed by one of the first Russian artillery shells. Some 600 men followed Cardigan “into the valley of death,” facing “cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them, cannon in front of them.”
The Russians opened fire as soon as it became clear that the Light Brigade was entering the valley. Lucan, who had fallen behind with the Heavy Brigade, instructed his troops to retreat; he said later that he saw no point in having a second crack unit sent to certain annihilation. Despite staggering losses, the Light Brigade actually reached its objective at the end of the valley and engaged the Russians with their light weapons, but without any support from the Heavy Brigade or other allied forces, the survivors were finally forced to withdraw. Of the more than 600 men of the Light Brigade who charged into the valley of death, only 195 were still with horses when the survivors regrouped at the conclusion of the action. The French Marshal Pierre Bosquet, who witnessed the Charge from his own position overlooking the valley, remarked "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre: c'est de la folie." ("It is magnificent, but it is not war: it is madness.")

The Aftermath

Immediately following the battle, Raglan blamed Cardigan, who in turn blamed Lucan. Lucan blamed Nolan, accusing him of miscommunicating the orders. Raglan insisted that the two orders should have been read together: advance to the heights and retrieve the guns. Instead, Lucan read them separately and assumed that the second order superseded the first; combined with Nolan’s vague hand directions, this muddle of orders sent the Light Brigade to almost certain death against the wrong objective.

The Crimean War was the first major war in history in which the armies were accompanied by reporters and photographers, and where battlefield news, good and bad, could be read and debated at the home front before the dead were cold in their graves. When the news of the disaster at Balaclava reached the British people, there was uproar. Raglan went on the offensive, immediately speaking to the media and placing the catastrophe squarely on Lucan’s shoulders. Lucan was eventually called to speak to the House of Lords regarding the battle, but was not punished and in fact rose in military rank before eventually retiring as a field marshal. Cardigan was considered a British hero and was promoted to Inspector General of the British Army.

To this day, the story of the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade is used to teach the importance of clear communication and intelligence in military maneuvers.
Lessons Learned

- **Stop-work power is vital**
  Lucan failed to execute good judgment and stop the advancement of his troops, despite the fact that he had questions about the orders and had someone else point out the folly of his intentions. In a letter rebutting Raglan’s accusations following the battle, he wrote “So distinct, in my Opinion, were your written Instructions, and so positive and urgent were the Orders delivered by the Aide-de-Camp, that I felt it was imperative upon me to obey; and I informed Lord Cardigan that he was to advance; and to the Objections he made, in which I entirely agreed, I replied that the Orders were from your Lordship.”

  Lucan was not confident in his power to take control and stop troop movements until he deemed that they were necessary. In a non-military industry, this is similar to workers feeling that they do not truly have stop work authorization. Workers who do not feel that they can stop work in dangerous situations present a clear and present danger to the assets and lives under their direction. Everyone working in a hazardous situation must be confident that they can stop work if danger arises without fear of intimidation or reprisal, or risk an obvious disaster occurring because no one was brave enough to speak up.

- **Always have a confirmed back up plan**
  Lucan’s orders informed him that his cavalry brigades would be supported by troop horse artillery and French cavalry. However, it is apparent that he did not stop to confirm the presence of these backup troops, which in fact had received no orders to support Lucan. A confirmed backup plan is crucial in any organization and for any action. If one assumes that the backup is in place and ready to go without checking, they have no one to blame but themselves when it doesn’t come through.

- **Conflict management is critical for efficient operations**
  There were a great number of interpersonal conflicts that may have led to the massacre of the Light Brigade. Lucan and Cardigan hated each other; there was bad blood between Lucan and Nolan; the relationship between Lucan and Raglan seems suspect as well. In the height of the Crimean War, these continued personal conflicts were allowed to overshadow the important matters. This demonstrates how vitally important it is to resolve personnel conflicts quickly and effectively. No matter the industry, if your staff cannot work together or is distracted by personnel problems, disaster will eventually strike.

*Balaclava war memorial*
The Charge of the Light Brigade

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Half a league half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred:
'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

'Forward, the Light Brigade!'  
Was there a man dismay'd?  
Not tho' the soldier knew  
Some one had blunder'd:  
Their not to make reply,  
Their not to reason why,  
Their but to do & die,  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon behind them  
Volley'd & thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
While horse & hero fell,  
They that had fought so well  
Came thro' the jaws of Death,  
Back from the mouth of Hell,  
All that was left of them,  
Left of six hundred.

When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wonder'd.  
Honour the charge they made!  
Honour the Light Brigade,  
Noble six hundred!
References:

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Photo credits:

“The Light Brigade in Battle.”

“Into the Valley of Death.”

“Cornet Wilken, survivor of the Charge.”

“Evacuating the wounded at Balaclava.”

“Balaclava war memorial.”

“Lord Raglan.”

“Lord Lucan.”