

Lessons for Leadership from Lincoln

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a privilege, and we owe it to ourselves to learn and develop to be the best leader we can be to our teams and to our company. Leadership styles are varied, and the situations are varied but there are some underlying leadership principles we all can learn from people around us and from great leaders of the past. One such leader is Abraham Lincoln. He often is regarded as the greatest US president who by sheer grit and extra ordinary leadership skills, saved the union and led the US in its most difficult period.

In this paper, I summarized the leadership lessons in the business classic, 'Lincoln on Leadership' by Donald T Phillips. Lincoln often used anecdotes to persuade and state his position which reveals his exceptional understanding of people. Lincoln stood for all that was right, honest, and self-evident. He grew up in poverty and had a binding link to the common people. He was innovative at a time when the age of discovery and inventions was just beginning. He was compassionate and caring yet, when necessary, could put his foot down firmly and be decisive beyond question. He was patient, persistent, consistent, and persuasive rather than dictatorial. He learned to express himself and demonstrate to others his beliefs and thoughts. Most importantly he refined his ability to persuade, direct, and motivate people. Lincoln combined an extraordinary wit with a gift for storytelling to become an effective communicator. He was naturally inquisitive, and he learned rapidly which led him to be extremely innovative. James MacGregor Burns in his landmark book 'Leadership' came closest when he wrote, "Leadership is leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations - the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations - of both leaders and followers."

INTRODUCTION

By the time Lincoln took office, seven states had seceded from the union to form the confederate states of America. Ten days before he took the oath of office on March 4, 1861, Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the confederacy in Montgomery, Alabama. The outgoing president, James Buchanan, had given up hope of holding the country together and was simply waiting for his term to expire. Moreover, Buchanan left Washington proclaiming that he was 'the last president of the United States'. Nor had United States Congress taken any action whatsoever to put down the rebellion. When he finally became president, Lincoln was faced with the realization that the south had taken control of all federal agencies and had seized almost every fort and arsenal in the southern territory and most of the Mississippi river. Washington was left almost defenseless, protected by a portion of nation's army which in 1861 was unprepared for war. The country was divided and hatred was the most prevalent emotion, and there was no effective leadership anywhere in the government.

Lincoln therefore was faced with the seemingly insurmountable problem of holding the nation together while at the same time organizing a new, more effective government that could prepare for an impending civil war. Such was the situation for a man who'd never held an executive leadership position; who had been only a one-term national congressman; who had no military experience. Few people at the time could have known, however, that he possessed all the leadership qualities necessary to save the union. Lincoln was the man who really knew how to lead and there can be no doubt that Lincoln is the greatest leader this country, and perhaps this world, has yet known. Here are his lessons and principles.

PART 1 - PEOPLE

Lincoln realized that people were a major source of information and that to be a good leader he had to stay close to them. If team members, or people in general, know that they genuinely have easy access to their leader, they tend to view the leader in a more positive, trustworthy light. A positive outlook and a pleasant disposition can yield valuable dividends for any leader.

1. GET OUT OF THE OFFICE

To make timely and reliable decisions, Lincoln needed access to information. Basically, he relied on three major sources: reports from trusted advisors, his practice of going to the field, and the modern technology of the age, the telegraph. All leaders must seek and require access to reliable and up-to-date information. And Lincoln was constantly seeking key intelligence so he could make quick, timely, and effective decisions. He needed accurate information, and the best way to obtain it was to go and get it himself. Also, for a leader, there is certain amount of value and effect in seeing people outside of the everyday business environment. In an informal setting people tend to be more relaxed, more direct, and more truthful. That's what Lincoln wanted-honest talk with people. He needed to know the truth. And Abraham Lincoln had an innate ability to perceive the truth. But there were times when he needed information and

couldn't find the time to get away and that's when he would send trusted advisers to gather facts and report back to him. And Lincoln was learning from others. He was acquiring new skills gleaned from his followers through frequent personal contact. Lincoln was learning while on the job. Future leaders can learn from Lincoln's example. Once of the most effective ways to gain acceptance of a philosophy is to show it in your daily actions. By entering your subordinate's environment-by establishing frequent human contact-you create a sense of commitment, collaboration, and community. You can also gain access to vital information necessary to make effective decisions.

2. BUILD STRONG ALLIANCES

Abraham Lincoln gained the trust and respect of his subordinates, building strong alliances on both personal and professional levels. He wanted to know how his people would respond in any given situation. He also wanted his subordinates to get to know him, so that they would know how he would respond in any given situation, what he wanted, demanded, and needed. If they knew what he would do, they could make their own decisions without asking him for direction, thereby avoiding delay and inactivity.

If followers learn that their leader is firm, resolute, and committed in the daily performance of his duty, respect can be gained, and trust will soon follow. People are much more likely to trust a leader if they know he is compassionate and forgiving of mistakes. After all, the most important asset a business organization has is its employees. So why not spend some time and money striving to understand more thoroughly what makes your people tick?

3. PERSUADE RATHER THAN COERCE

Abraham Lincoln possessed an outgoing interest in people and had the ability to gain the confidence and respect of a wide variety of individuals. He was poised and confident under pressure, and he influenced others with his friendly manner, openness, and verbal skills. Though he was decisive, he almost always rejected coercion as a means of attaining what he desired. Lincoln tied in the Golden Rule to his personal leadership style. He treated people the way he would want to be treated; the way he knew others wanted to be treated.

Lincoln learned, refined, and mastered the art of persuasion during his early career. No one wants to be forced to do something against his will. People generally want to believe that what they're doing truly makes a difference, and, more important, that it is their own idea. Lincoln attempted to gain commitment from individuals through openness, empowerment, and coaching. Relating a well-chosen story or anecdote was his chief form of persuasion in getting others to come around to his side. Another method of persuasion Lincoln often used was to write long, detailed letters to his subordinates.

PART 2 - CHARACTER

The architecture of leadership, all the theories and guidelines, fall apart without honesty and integrity. It's the key stone that holds an organization together. Famous author, Tom Peters reported in his research that the best, most aggressive, and successful organizations were the ones that stressed integrity and trust. Integrity is tied closely to the values espoused by the effective leader. It is the leader's role to lift the followers out of their everyday selves up to a higher level of awareness, motivation, and commitment.

4. HONESTY AND INTEGRITY ARE THE BEST POLICIES

Trust, honesty, and integrity are exceedingly important qualities because they so strongly affect followers. Most individuals need to trust others especially their boss. Subordinates must perceive their leader as a consistently fair person if they're to engage in the kind of innovative risk taking that brings the company rewards.

But Lincoln also practiced what he preached. When he made it to the top he would turn and reach down for the person behind him helping to elevate that person to his better self. He would help others climb the ladder of success with patience, trust, and respect.

5. NEVER ACT OUT OF VENGEANCE OR SPITE

Followers in virtually every organization respond better to and will more easily be led by a leader who consistently displays kindness and empathy than one who is associated with vindictiveness or animosity. This, of course, is only human nature, and Abraham Lincoln seemed to instinctively realize it. Moreover, he understood that to actively engage in slander and malicious dealings would simply eat up far too much of his time, which he used in securing positive end results rather than negative ones. Pettiness, spite, and vengeance are emotional reactions considered to be beneath the dignity of a leader. Followers expect their leaders to rise above such demeaning and degrading activity. While kindness was the very foundation of his personality, Lincoln also understood that if people were going to come to him with ideas, suggestions, and better ways of making things work, he had to provide the climate to allow it. He actively encouraged innovative thinking and the participation of subordinates. Lincoln wanted to "adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views."

6. HAVE THE COURAGE TO HANDLE UNJUST CRITICISM

Lincoln had faith and confidence in himself and didn't need ego stroking or constant reinforcement to know that his course of action was proper. The ability to understand the reality of the situation and then confront it decisively made him a most formidable leader. Moreover, he was able to formulate a strategy and then communicate both the strategy and the reality of civil war whether people wanted to hear or not. Telling it like it was brought forth enormous amounts of censure upon Lincoln from all directions but every man of courage must sooner or later deal with unjust criticism and all individuals who lead other people are likely to be subject to severe criticism as well as personal attacks on their honor and character. Lincoln realized this fact of life and was prepared for it as every leader should be. As a President, Lincoln learned that no matter what he did there were going to be people who would not be pleased. Throughout much of his

life Lincoln was the object of jealousy and envy and malice this was largely the result of his burning desire for achievement which motivated him to excel.

Lincoln handled such defamation in several different ways. Most often he would simply ignore their attacks. Lincoln would stand up and defend himself to all detractors especially if the false accusation was particularly damaging to the public's view of his principles. Lincoln would not back down or compromise and had overwhelming confidence in his own ability to know right from wrong. This gave Lincoln great strength to combat unjust criticism. He was not intimidated when so many others took a position that he considered to be morally unjust neither would he back down in the face of harsh accusations against his own beliefs.

7. BE A MASTER OF PARADOX

Lincoln showed his mastery of paradox by skillfully providing a rock solid, stable government as a foundation for the nation's security, while at the same time personally instituting massive amounts of change. He coupled this chief paradox with many other seemingly contradictory approaches that all leaders, in every walk of life, must master to be successful. Here are just some of the paradoxes that are easily identifiable in Lincoln's leadership style: He was charismatic at unassuming. He was consistent at flexible. He was a victim of vast amounts of slander and malice yet he was also immensely popular with the troops. He was trusting and compassionate yet could also be demanding and tough. He was a risk taker and innovative, yet patient and calculating. He claimed not to have controlled events, that his policy was to have no policy when, in actuality he did control events to a very large degree by being aggressive, taking charge, and being extraordinarily decisive. He seemed to have a 'revolving door' of generals whom he often removed and replaced; yet, in reality, he gave them ample time and support to produce results.

PART 3 - ENDEAVOR

What would have been the consequences had Lincoln not been decisive? We can only shudder at the thought. We certainly recognize that his decisiveness enacted extraordinary change. He literally changed attitudes, behaviors, and the way people live their lives. He altered the face of the nation forever by abolishing the institution of slavery and not allowing the South to secede. And what is more, he actually intended to do both, which, almost by definition, makes him a great leader. He set his goals, preached his vision, and accompanied his mission.

8. EXERCISE A STRONG HAND-BE DECISIVE

Like Lincoln, the best, most decisive leaders are those who have a set purpose and the self-confidence to accomplish that objective. But effective visions and noble goals can be made worthless without solid decision-making leadership, especially in today's fast-paced, competitive business environment where decisions are almost never simply black and white. Often, all the information is not available and important decision must be made by a certain deadline. Short term solutions are frequently at odds with long term goals. Sometimes the leader makes the right choice even though it may not be immediately obvious. Business executives know that it is sometimes difficult to implement decisions that have major impact on an organization. Willingness to make change is not easy to come by, and bureaucratic stumbling blocks are often seemingly impossible to overcome. But decisions must be made, and they must be consistent for any organization to be successful. Consider for a moment what a company is like without effective decisiveness: nothing happens, and opportunities are lost. People wander about aimlessly, aggressive employees become frustrated, and lethargic employees are not motivated. But in the corporation with decisive leaders the atmosphere is dynamic and vibrant, people move with a spring in their step and purpose in their direction, opportunity seeks out the company and the well-focused firm-one backed by solid vision and well thought out goals almost always succeeds.

Abraham Lincoln understood that executive decision making is not simply a string of individual orders. Rather it is a more of a continuous uninterrupted process that is similar to the beating of a heart that sends blood throughout the body without it there is no life.

9. LEAD BY BEING LED

There is much evidence to indicate that Lincoln, largely through his extraordinary assertiveness, stood alone when it came to making major decisions during his presidency. Even though he often conferred with his advisers on important matters, using them as sounding boards, it is clear that Lincoln made most crucial decisions during his term in office.

Lincoln also had the enviable quality of being able to listen to people and be guided by them without being threatened himself. He possessed the open mindedness and flexibility necessary for worthwhile leadership. Frequently he would listen to his subordinate suggestions and recommendations. If they made sense, if their course of action matched his own ideas, he would let them proceed with the knowledge and belief that it was their idea. However, if he was uncomfortable with what was being suggested, Lincoln would focus, direct, or point his people to what he viewed as a proper path. But rather than ordering or dictating, Lincoln refined his ability to direct others by implying, hinting, or suggesting. He was flexible, open minded, and willing to let his subordinates take all the glory for victories. He gave people the impression that they were leading him. And, in fact, he did give many of his subordinates the lead. But he always exerted some control. He stayed informed of their activity. However, if they were deviating from the proper path, Lincoln guided them back on course. And when the means were inadequate to achieve the goal, he tended to talk them out of it or, when necessary, uses power to overrule. But Lincoln's chief objective was to allow his subordinates to say, "we accomplished this ourselves."

10. SET GOALS AND BE RESULTS-ORIENTED

Leadership requires aggressive individuals-those who accept a 'take charge' role. Leaders, in general, are self-starting and change oriented. They set a strategic direction and initiate as well as act. They achieve results as opposed to only

carrying out activity. For Lincoln, the need to achieve was more than just a simple inclination; it was an almost uncontrollable obsession. Yet even though he often became depressed at failure and setbacks, Lincoln developed the enviable ability to persevere and learn from his own failures.

Establishing goals and gaining their acceptance from subordinates is crucial for effective leadership. Goals unified people, motivate them, focus their talent and energy. So, he constantly set specific short-term goals that his generals and cabinet members could focus on with intent and immediacy. Like all great leaders, Lincoln was driven. He was results oriented.

Lincoln did not shun conflict, instead he resolved dissension among his subordinates in a timely manner, knowing full well that it could serve only to delay progress. Lincoln realized, as do most leaders, that roadblocks and unresolved conflict simply gum up the works and slow achievement. Lincoln created a contagious enthusiasm among followers by demonstrating a sense of urgency toward attainment of his goals.

11. KEEP SEARCHING UNTIL YOU FIND YOUR 'GRANT'

Choose as your chief subordinates those people who crave responsibility and take risks. If employees gripe about one of your chief supervisors, the complaints are true do not be afraid to remove him. Give your followers all the support you can, and act on the presumption that they will do the best they can with what you give them. Provide your managers with three-to-five-month grace period to see if they will act and perform adequately. If they don't perform adequately, ease them out of power gradually, always giving them ample time to turn it around. Beware of subordinates who keep piling up information without ever really accomplishing anything. Do not forget that aggressive leaders tend to choose employees in their own image.

12. ENCOURAGE INNOVATION

Genuine leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln, are not only instruments of change, but they are also catalysts for change. Lincoln affected the change needed by being extraordinarily decisive and by creating an atmosphere of entrepreneurship that fostered innovative techniques. In so doing, he not only got things moving, but he also gained commitment from a wide array of individuals who were excited at the prospect of seeing their ideas implemented. He adopted a 'more than one way to skin a cat' attitude and would not be consumed with methodology.

Lincoln's obsessive quest for results tended to create a climate for risk taking and innovation. Inevitably there were failures, but Lincoln had great tolerance for failure because he knew that if his generals were not making mistakes they were not moving. He viewed the failures of his generals as mistakes, learning events, or steps in the right direction.

Lincoln essentially treated his subordinates as equals; They were colleagues in a joint effort. He had enough confidence in himself that he was not threatened by skillful generals or able cabinet officials. Rather than surround himself with yes men, he associated with people who really knew their business, people from whom he could learn something, whether they were antagonistic or not. And often overlooked component of leadership is this ability to learn from people and experiences, from successes and failures. The best leaders never stop learning. They possess a special capacity to be taught by those with whom they come into contact. In essence, this ongoing accumulation of knowledge prepares organization for change.

Abraham Lincoln was naturally inquisitive, and he possessed this inherent capacity to learn. He also had the desire to learn new things, which led him to be unusually innovative. He also expected and encourage the same creative and resourceful behavior from his subordinates.

A leader's ability to develop innovative ideas and ask for people's help in implementing them may seem to be obvious keys to success. But the sad fact is that too many of today's leaders resign themselves to the limits imposed on them by flawed systems rather than rethinking those systems. He realized that, as an executive leader, it was his chief responsibility to create the climate of risk-free entrepreneurship necessary to foster effective innovations.

PART 4 - COMMUNICATION

Modern leadership theory has stressed the importance of effective communication. Lee Iacocca put it more simply by stating the only way you can motivate people is to communicate with them. As Peters put it "Effective communication also shapes values for people by not only bringing company philosophy to life but also helps newcomers understand how shared values affect individual performance." Communication creates meaning for people. It's the only way any group, small or large, can become aligned behind the overarching goals of an organization.

13. MASTER THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

The adage 'it's not what you say but how you say it' also applies to Abraham Lincoln's communication style. Today's leaders would do well to embody Lincoln's simple straightforward approach, especially when sending complex messages that can be easily misread. Messages are more often heard when the communicator is honest, sincere, and succinct. In other words, say what you mean and mean what you say. Lincoln built credibility by being consistent and clear when speaking to others. But he did with more than words; his actions mirror what he said. Nothing frustrates subordinates more than receiving mixed messages. No matter what the method of communication – memos, discussions, phone calls, etc. - to lead effectively you must be clear and confident in what you have to say then you must follow through.

14. INFLUENCE PEOPLE THROUGH CONVERSATION AND STORYTELLING

Though Abraham Lincoln was an outstanding writer and public speaker, he was even more adept at the art of conversation. He had a terrific sense of humor and often sprinkled his conversations with witty stories and humorous anecdotes that he used as persuasive tools. Lincoln, turned out, had an overwhelming inventory of anecdotes, jokes, and stories; Furthermore, he possessed the ability to instantly pull out just the right one for any situation that might arise. Storytelling came naturally to Lincoln. Lincoln's humor was a major component of his ability to persuade people he knew the effect it had and used it to the utmost. People became fascinated with his quick wit and hilarious stories as a result, many of his humorous anecdotes found their way into print while he was still alive.

Recent work in the field of leadership confirms Lincoln's strategy and emphasizes the role of stories as powerful motivational tools that spread loyalty, commitment, and enthusiasm. Every leader must realize that the power to motivate followers resides almost solely in the ability to communicate effectively.

15. PREACH A VISION AND CONTINUALLY REAFFIRM IT

Effective visions, according to Tom Peters, are inspiring. They are 'clear and challenging' and about excellence. They make sense and can stand the test of time; they are stable, yet flexible. An effective vision empowers people and prepares for the future while also having roots in the past.

Lincoln provided grassroots leadership. Everywhere he went at every conceivable opportunity, he reaffirmed, reasserted, and reminded everyone of the basic principles upon which the nation was founded. His vision was simple, and he preached it often. Effective visions and organization mission statements can't be forced rather they must be set in motion by means of persuasion. The people must accept and implement them wholeheartedly and without reservation. When this is achieved, it is always done with enthusiasm, commitment, and pride.

CONCLUSION

Lincoln was extraordinary self-confident and possessed great persuasive and political skills that were developed over his lifetime. In order to comprehend modern leadership theory and be successful in the future, leaders must look to the past to President Abraham Lincoln, who routinely practiced nearly all the revolutionary thinking techniques that are preached to the industry. Lincoln can be looked like an ideal model for desirable, effective leadership. He's a perfect example of what James MacGregor Burns termed a transforming leader, a person who aims for the evolution of a new level of awareness and understanding among all members of an organization. Such a leader rejects the use of naked power and instead attempts to motivate and mobilize followers by persuading them to take ownership of their roles in a grander mission that is shared by all members of the organization.

Lincoln knew that true leadership is often realized by exerting quiet and subtle influence on a day-to-day basis, by frequently seeing followers and other people face to face. He treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect, whether they were kings or commoners. He lifted people out of their everyday selves into higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness. He obtained extraordinary results from ordinary people by installing purpose in their endeavors. He was open, civil, tolerant, and fair, and he maintained a respect for the dignity of all peoples at all times. Abraham Lincoln was essence of leadership.

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