

LINCOLN ON LEADERSHIP

Executive Strategies For Tough Times

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MAIN IDEA

Abraham Lincoln is consistently rated as the greatest President the United States has ever produced. Despite the fact that it is more than 125 years since his death, his example still motivates and inspires people all around the world.

The one trait that most people generally admire about Lincoln is that he was a great leader. The fact that he held the United States of America together during a bitter Civil War speaks volumes for his abilities as a leader. The principles of leadership which Lincoln practiced allowed him to arise out of that great crisis and set new standards for the heights any leader may aspire to.

Even by modern standards, Lincoln's accomplishments are impressive. One could do worse than to try and emulate such an excellent example of the power of leadership.

1. PEOPLE

Abraham Lincoln was one of the most accessible leaders America has ever seen. He visited with people so much that he could appreciate their viewpoints whenever he needed to make an important decision. No person was ever denied access to the President, regardless of whether they held a high office or none at all.

This background allowed Lincoln to understand and appreciate human nature in all its complexities. Based on that understanding, he could form strong and useful alliances with people all over the political spectrum - even those who were of different political philosophies.

Lincoln rarely issued direct orders. His preferred method of working with people was to suggest a proper course of action - generally using humorous stories with strong morals - and then let people move on their own initiative. He also took the time to write long letters which set out exactly what he thought about a matter so there would not be any misunderstanding.

2. CHARACTER

The foundation of effective leadership is the personal character of the leader. If he exemplifies the principles of honesty and integrity, everything else will fall into its allocated place.

Building on that foundation, good leaders also add liberal amounts of empathy for those that they lead. And rounding out the character traits of good leaders are faith and the self-confidence to be rigid when needed and flexible when possible.

3. ENDEAVOR

One of the key traits of strong leaders is that the group is moving forward rather than marking time. To achieve this, leaders must be decisive and show initiative.

At the same time, a leader should not get so far out in front they lose touch with the people in the group. Good leaders take advice from their charges without feeling threatened personally. They encourage people to think for themselves, and take advantage of the good ideas which result.

Another key characteristic of good leaders are they cultivate and empower their employees or followers. They develop people within their organizations who are capable of acting on their own, thereby multiplying the effectiveness of the leader and the organization as a whole.

4. COMMUNICATION

By necessity, strong and effective leaders are good communicators. While set speeches can set the tone for a leader, the vast bulk of his work is carried out through personal conversations with people throughout his organization. In these instances, good leaders have the ability to put into words where the organization is heading, and what will be the result once the destination is reached.

Passion comes across strongly in conversation. The best way to instill strong feelings within the soul of every person in the organization is to tell humorous stories which illustrate the point being made. If this can be done effectively and repeatedly, everyone will become so motivated they will literally be capable of moving mountains to achieve the goal.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Historical Background

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States of America, about 72-years after George Washington was appointed as the first President.

Ten days before President Lincoln took office in March 1861, seven states seceded from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson Davis sworn in as their President. The Confederate States claimed all federal agencies, properties and arsenals within their territory.

Lincoln was viewed by his own advisors at the time of his election as being no more than a second-rate country lawyer with scant leadership experience and absolutely no idea on how things were done in Washington. Most of the people who accepted office in Lincoln's cabinet considered him to be a figurehead they would be able to manipulate to suit their own personal agendas.

To make matters worse, Lincoln was assuming executive control of the nation's armed forces just at the very moment civil war was about to break out. Lincoln had no military experience, had never been tested in the heat of battle and seemed totally ill equipped for running an army.

Yet despite all these obstacles, Abraham Lincoln managed to exert such leadership that he held an entire nation together in its most perilous hour. In addition, Lincoln expanded the office of the President of the United States to such an authoritative pinnacle that today the person who holds this elected office is widely considered to be the most powerful person in the world.

In essence, Lincoln's accomplishments were based solely on his style of leadership and personal philosophy. Today, more than 130 years after he held office, Abraham Lincoln is still considered to be the greatest leader the United States has ever known. Many Americans would even argue he is the best leader the world has ever produced.

Abraham Lincoln instinctively knew how to lead, and these are the principles and lessons his leadership taught.

Key Thoughts

"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. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers' values and motivations."

– James MacGregor Burns

"Many acts heralded or bemoaned as instances of leadership - acts of oratory, manipulation, sheer self-advancement, brute coercion - are not such. Much of what commonly passes as leadership - conspicuous position-taking without followers or follow-through, posturing on various public stages, manipulation without general purpose, authoritarianism - is no more leadership than the behaviour of small boys marching in front of a parade, who continue to strut along Main Street after the procession has turned down a side street toward the fairgrounds."

– James MacGregor Burns

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Main Idea

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Supporting Ideas

1. Take advice from everyone who offers it

In 1982, Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in their book *In Search of Excellence* articulated the concept of MBWA - management by wandering around. They suggested the best managers get out of their office and establish contact with their employees, their customers and their suppliers to get an accurate picture of the state of operations.

Abraham Lincoln practiced this same principle instinctively. His presidency was marked by a completely open door policy - in fact, his secretaries once estimated Lincoln spent 75-percent of his time meeting with members of his cabinet, his army leaders and ordinary citizens who would call on him at his office. In one of the years of his presidency, Lincoln actually spent more time out of his White House office than in it.

Lincoln considered the best way to gather information was to talk in an informal setting to the people who would be most affected by any decision he made. When that was not possible to do physically, he would send a trusted adviser to gather information for him. He also relied on the most modern communication technology of his age - the telegraph.

During the Civil War, Lincoln frequently went and visited the troops in the front lines personally. When he had not been present at an important skirmish, he would summons witnesses to visit with him and give him a first-hand account. He worked hard at entering all his subordinates' working environments so he could understand their needs and create a sense of commitment on their behalf.

2. Build strong alliances

Abraham Lincoln had an ability to build strong alliances with people who were of strong opposite viewpoints. In fact, he even appointed Edwin Stanton as his Secretary of War despite the fact that Stanton hated him (and had reportedly once called Lincoln a giraffe). Lincoln considered Stanton was the best man for the job.

Similarly, Lincoln appointed William Seward as his Secretary of State despite the fact that Seward had run against him for election as President. Within a short period of time getting to know them personally, Seward and Stanton became two of Lincoln's most competent and trusted cabinet members.

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