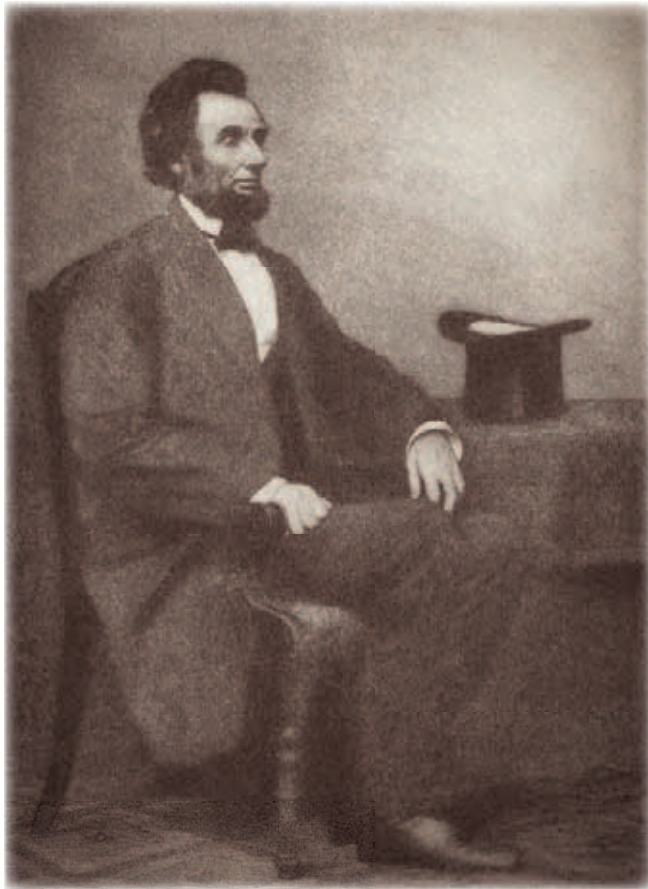


# Lincoln and Leadership: Lessons for Today's Leaders

*What lessons can we learn from one of the United States' most-respected leaders?*

By Bob Avery



**A**braham Lincoln was elected President of the United States on November 6, 1860, and by his inauguration on March 4, 1861, seven states had issued declarations of secession. Southern states had already taken control of all federal agencies and seized most forts and arsenals in the South.

Between Lincoln's election and his inauguration, the U.S. Senate had passed resolutions to *reduce* spending on the military. The Mississippi River, a key point of commerce and transportation, was obstructed. Washington, D.C., was virtually defenseless and the entirety of the

U.S. Army consisted of only 16,000 soldiers under the command of a 75-year-old general.

Yet, over the course of his four years in office, Lincoln and his leadership held a divided nation together. He is now considered one of the country's greatest presidents and best leaders. What can today's leaders learn from the 16th president?

## Daunting Challenges

The condition of the nation in 1861 went well beyond secession. To say that the United States was underprepared for the coming Civil War would be an understatement. The new president was under pressure from fierce abolitionists to act on the issue of slavery, but he also had to work to keep several slave-holding border states in the Union, including Delaware, Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland.

The financial crisis of 1857 was still negatively affecting the nation's economy and unemployment had spiked. Budget deficits were a significant concern. The new president was elected by only a plurality of voters in a four-way contest (Stephen A. Douglas, John C. Breckinridge, and John Bell were the other candidates earning electoral votes), far from a majority and certainly with no clear mandate.

Nor did the winner of the 1860 election bring an inspiring resume to the table:

- 1832: Lost an election for the Illinois Assembly
- 1833: Failed as a businessman
- 1836: Suffered a nervous breakdown
- 1838: Defeated for Speaker of the State Legislature
- 1843: Defeated in a run for Congress
- 1846: Won election to Congress
- 1848: Lost his renomination bid for Congress
- 1849: Rejected for a federal appointment
- 1854: Defeated in election for U.S. Senate
- 1856: Defeated in a run for the Vice Presidential nomination
- 1858: Lost election for U.S. Senate

## Leadership Lessons

Many regarded Lincoln as a second-rate country lawyer. He had never held an executive position and had limited military experience. His only political experience on the national level was as a one-term member of the House of Representatives. In fact, many members of his own cabinet considered him a figurehead whom they could manipulate.

So, what was it about his leadership style 150 years ago that can serve as a guidepost for today's leaders? In his book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, Donald Phillips writes: "Leadership is an elusive concept that, at times, can be vague and ambiguous. . . . That is why the art of leading people is so difficult to master and teach, and why there is such a great need for role models. . . . It is only by examining individuals such as Abraham Lincoln that we can ever hope to understand how effective leadership really works."

In *Lincoln on Leadership*, Phillips identifies 15 lessons that can be learned from Lincoln, and organizes them into four major topics: people, character, endeavor, and communication. Following are lessons in each of these topic areas.

### Leadership and People

Phillips identifies three lessons we can learn from Lincoln's leadership with regard to people:

1. Circulate among the troops.
2. Build strong alliances.
3. Persuade rather than coerce.

Let's look at the first two lessons.

Lincoln routinely spent time in the telegraph office of the War Department (predecessor the Department of Defense) receiving updates from the front. He also visited the troops frequently. By getting out of the White House, Lincoln interacted with people where they were.

### *Lincoln inspired trust, loyalty, and admiration because he was present and engaged with his staff.*

In this more relaxed environment, individuals felt more comfortable and were more open and forthright with information. This allowed Lincoln to operate with current and key information that he gathered personally. He practiced what Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, authors of *In Search of Excellence*, called "management by walking around."

Lincoln inspired trust, loyalty, and admiration because he was present and engaged with his staff. He shared his vision of the cause—a united nation—and stressed the importance of staff in realizing that vision. This practice created buy-in from his cabinet and leading generals, as

well as soldiers in the field and the clerks working the night shift in the telegraph office.

*Advice for today's leaders:* Get out of your office. Talk to your staff. Gather information directly and build buy-in to your vision by emphasizing the importance of every staff member's contributions to the mission at hand.

### Leadership and Character

Phillips identifies four lessons that he grouped under the heading of character:

1. Display honesty and integrity.
2. Never act out of vengeance.
3. Handle unjust criticism.
4. Be a master of paradox.

Let's turn to handling criticism for the lesson.

Lincoln was frequently insulted, slandered, and attacked by political opponents, by members of the press, and by Southern leadership. He was called a "grotesque baboon," "a coarse vulgar joker," "a dictator," "an ape," "the craftiest and most dishonest politician that ever disgraced an office in America." Lincoln's response? He said, "As a general rule, I abstain from reading the reports of attacks upon myself, wishing not to be provoked by that to which I cannot properly offer an answer."

However, if the attacks went beyond personal to undermining support for his vision and the task at hand, Lincoln would respond. "I have found that it is not entirely safe, when one is misrepresented under his very nose, to allow the misrepresentation to go uncontradicted," he explained.

To vent his frustrations, Lincoln frequently wrote long letters to the offending party—but he rarely sent those letters. The simple act of writing down his feelings allowed the president to release his anger. Not sending the letters allowed him to maintain those relationships and the support he had built.

*Lessons for today's leaders:* It is easy to share your frustrations immediately via email—draft that email, but don't send it. Sit on it, revise it, then send it only if absolutely necessary. Ignore the personal attacks, but do not let demonstrably false attacks on the program stand without correction.

### Leadership and Endeavor

To endeavor is to try hard to do or achieve something. Lincoln exhibited this by:

1. Being decisive.
2. Leading by being led.
3. Being results-orientated.
4. Encouraging innovation.
5. Continually "searching for his Grant."

Seven generals commanded the Union armies before Lincoln promoted Ulysses Grant to the position, but

those appointments were not arbitrary. They were purposeful and made only after Lincoln gave the generals the opportunity to turn around the struggling Union effort. During those years, Lincoln was also willing to reorganize the organization—in this case the U.S. Army—to be more effective. Departments were created or consolidated as needs dictated. Lincoln was willing to change course when efforts weren't successful.

Lincoln led by being led. He was willing to be guided and was not threatened by his followers. While he set policy and direction, he allowed his generals and his cabinet to take action and manage the tactics of the war. Critical to this, though, was his practice of giving credit to subordinates when it was due and taking responsibility when things went wrong.

After the Battle of Vicksburg, Lincoln wrote to Grant, "I never had my faith, except a general hope that you knew better. . . . I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong." On April 11, 1865, after the war concluded, the President said, "No part of the honor, for plan or execution, is mine. To General Grant, his skillful officers, and brave men, all belongs."

Through this work, Lincoln inspired loyalty, trust, admiration, and commitment. Subordinates understood how their effort contributed to the success of the endeavor and appreciated being recognized for it.

*Lessons for today's leaders:* Leaders who take the credit and assign the blame eventually find themselves to be leaders without followers—subordinates, perhaps, but not followers.

### **Leadership and Communication**

The lessons Phillips draws from Lincoln regarding communication are these:

1. Master public speaking.
2. Influence others through storytelling.
3. Preach a vision and reaffirm it.

Lincoln was an outstanding orator, "full of wit, facts, dates, and the best stump speaker with droll ways and dry jokes," according to his greatest rival, Stephen A. Douglas. School business officials do not often have to demonstrate storytelling abilities, but we do need to know our facts and be prepared to speak about them.

Lincoln never considered anything he had written to be finished until it was published, or any speech to be finalized until actually delivered. In fact, he was revising the Gettysburg Address while on his way to the ceremony.

Lincoln also had a knack for communicating with people in a way that put them at ease. He used anecdotes, humor, metaphors, and stories to make his point. He said, "They say I tell a great many stories. I reckon

I do; but I have learned from long experience that plain people . . . are more easily influenced through the medium of a broad and humorous illustration than in any other way." Lincoln spoke in a language his audience understood. He avoided details and jargon so as not to confuse the issue at hand.

*A great vision calls upon the past, relates it to the present, renews the vision, and then links it to the future.*

But it was in his ability to preach a vision and to reaffirm it that his influence was greatest. Subordinates can be persuaded, but not forced to buy into the vision of the leader. Lincoln regularly spoke to troops in a way that communicated his vision and related their efforts to realizing that vision.

A great vision calls upon the past, relates it to the present, renews the vision, and then links it to the future. There is, arguably, no expression of vision that so clearly meets these criteria and so eloquently preaches and reaffirms a vision as the Gettysburg Address.

*Lessons for today's leaders:* As education leaders, we need to share our story, expressing our district's vision in order to build the support of our staff and our communities. We can do that by mastering public speaking and by communicating in a way that puts the audience at ease and draws them into the purpose. Whether in writing or speaking, we must identify our audience and tailor our message to them.

As we share our vision, we can learn from Lincoln's example and continuously improve how we share our message as we call upon the past, tie it to the present, and link it to the future.

### **Conclusion**

Circulating among the troops, handling criticism, leading by being led, and preaching a vision all come back to building the loyalty and trust of our followers so they will help us move our organization toward fulfilling its vision. This is the example that Abraham Lincoln provides us as leaders in the 21st Century, and it is one that we would be well-served to study further.

### **Reference**

Phillips, D. 1992. *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*. New York: Warner Books.

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