



Book Lincoln on Leadership

Executive Strategies for Tough Times

Donald T. Phillips
Warner Books, 1993

Recommendation

Donald T. Phillips has written a solid and engaging book. It has been hailed by critics and leaders in business, sports, and every other arena as a common sense masterpiece of historical and character analysis. The book is divided into key lessons, each representing an aspect of President Abraham Lincoln’s leadership style, as revealed through his words and actions. A beautifully written intimate history, the book shows Lincoln in action. The discussion reveals clearly how any leader can apply Lincoln’s timeless principles about communication, character, endeavor, and people. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone interested in leadership, Lincoln, or history.

Take-Aways

- Abraham Lincoln is consistently ranked as the greatest president and leader the United States has ever had.
- Lincoln represented the best of the leadership qualities that had helped to form a nation.
- He was compassionate and caring, yet when necessary, he could put his foot down firmly and be decisive beyond question.
- He was patient, persistent, consistent, and persuasive, rather than dictatorial.
- He spent time with those he led in order to create a sense of commitment and collaboration.
- Lincoln’s honesty and integrity were the foundation of his leadership.
- Lincoln was strong and well-informed.
- Lincoln was an eloquent speaker who wrote his own speeches, which were considered masterpieces.
- Lincoln knew how to persuade and how to influence people through conversation, storytelling, and humor.
- Lincoln is the ideal model for desirable, effective, and transformational leadership.

Summary

Abraham Lincoln is consistently ranked as the greatest president the United States ever had. He is considered the greatest leader the nation has "ever known or will ever know." Lincoln represented the best of the leadership qualities that helped form the nation. He "stood for all that was right, honest, and self-evident."

“Perhaps true leadership is uncommon in today’s society because it’s not genuinely understood and has often been misinterpreted.”

As a young boy, he studied the Founding Fathers, those leaders who called for independence and then created a nation devoted to human rights. He believed in their idealism and wanted to see it in action. "He was innovative at a time when the age of discoveries and inventions was just beginning." He was compassionate, decisive, patient, persistent, consistent, and persuasive. The foundation of Lincoln’s leadership style was "an unshakeable commitment to the rights of the individual."

The Lincoln Principles

During his four years as president, the Civil War was his focus. By the time he took office, seven states had already left the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.

“Why would today’s leaders be interested in Abraham Lincoln’s leadership style and philosophy? Because, by modern standards, Lincoln’s accomplishments would be regarded as no less than a miracle.”

Lincoln was assassinated just days after the war ended with the Confederate Army’s surrender. So, during his presidency, Lincoln spent most of his time among his troops and at key government offices coordinating the war effort. He met regularly with his generals and cabinet members, with Congress, and with the wounded at hospitals. This kind of hands-on personal approach was typical of his leadership style. He was probably the most accessible president the U.S. has ever had.

“Simply spending time together and getting to know one’s subordinates can overcome mountains of personal differences and hard feelings.”

"The Lincoln Principles" concerning people are based upon entering your subordinates’ environment personally and frequently. This creates a sense of commitment, collaboration, and community, and helps you gain the information you need when making effective decisions.

These principles include:

- Explaining yourself in writing and offering advice on solving problems.
- Having contact with subordinates in casual ways, not just at formal gatherings.
- Seeing people who call on you.
- Being informed of public opinion.
- Setting a good example and leading by example.
- Discouraging a fear of leaders, but encouraging respect.
- Building strong alliances.
- Gaining followers’ trust by showing them you are firm, resolute, and committed to performing your duties.
- Taking the time to understand human nature.
- Showing that you are compassionate and caring.
- Remembering that if you extinguish hope you create desperation.
- Waging only one war at a time.
- Using force only as a last resort.
- Remembering that your followers want to believe that what they do is their own idea, and that it makes a difference.
- Seeking the consent of your followers for you to lead them.
- Delegating responsibility and authority.
- Consulting frequently with the heads of your departments.
- Requesting or suggesting rather than issuing orders.

Principles of Character

Abraham Lincoln was given the nickname "Honest Abe" when he was a young man, and owned and ran a general store in New Salem, Illinois. Lincoln's reputation for honesty and integrity was not just a myth. It remains unblemished today. In fact, as more and more is discovered about him, Lincoln's reputation is enhanced.

“He was naturally inquisitive and he learned rapidly, which led him to be extremely innovative. He is, in fact, the only U.S. president to hold a patent.” (He received the patent for a method of making grounded boats more buoyant.)

The entire "architecture of leadership, all the theories and guidelines, falls apart without honesty and integrity." These qualities must be sincere, not an act. One of the reasons why Lincoln was so admired in his lifetime was because it was so clear that his integrity was real. Following the Lincoln Principles concerning character will earn trust and respect from your team members.

“Abraham Lincoln represented the summation of those leadership qualities that had helped to form a nation.”

Putting these principles into action includes:

- Giving subordinates a fair chance, equal freedom, the opportunity for success, and help getting to the top.
- Setting and responding to the goals and values that move your subordinates.
- Being consistently fair and decent, both professionally and personally.
- Not supporting a charge against someone unless you know it to be true.
- Advancing the organization's aims and helping those who serve it.
- Never acting out of spite or vengeance, or punishing for punishment's sake.
- Never turning people into enemies.
- Remembering that the organization takes on the personality of its leader.
- Having the courage to handle unjust criticism.
- Correcting misrepresentations about you, anyone else, and any facts or events.
- Not yielding to any false charges.
- Avoiding arguments.
- Never explaining anything to your enemies. "What they want is a squabble and a fuss; and that [is what] they can have if you explain, and they cannot have if you don't."

Principles of Endeavor

Lincoln is considered the first modern president in many respects. He is most famous for freeing the slaves and preserving the federal Union, but he also "greatly expanded the limits of American presidential authority and power" which was necessary to strengthen and preserve the Union during the Civil War.

“Lincoln realized that people were a major source of information and that to be a good leader, he had to stay close to them.”

Early in his first term, Lincoln was under constant pressure from his advisors to give in to the South's demands in order to avoid a civil war. When a Virginian advised him to "surrender all forts and property in the southern states," Lincoln immediately said no. Then he told Aesop's fable of the lion and the woodman's daughter.

“When a leader begins to coerce his followers, he's essentially abandoning leadership and embracing dictatorship.”

A lion was in love with a woodman's daughter and went to the woodman to ask to marry her. The woodman replied, "Your teeth are too long." So the lion had them pulled out. He returned to the woodman to once again ask to marry his daughter. The woodman again said no and added, "Your claws are too long." So the lion had them removed. Then he returned to claim his bride, and the woodman, seeing that the lion was completely unarmed and defenseless, viciously beat up the lion. After concluding the fable, Lincoln said to the Virginian, "May it not be so with me, if I give up all that is asked?"

“Lincoln always did the right thing, or at least he attempted to do so. He simply did not deal with people he knew to be dishonest. 'Stand with anybody that stands right,' he preached. 'Stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong.'”

The Lincoln Principles concerning "endeavor" focus on being decisive, strong, and informed.

They include:

- Seizing the initiative and never relinquishing it.
- Never giving up your key points of strength, like Aesop's lion did.
- Remembering that compromise doesn't equal cowardice.
- Not feeling insecure or threatened by your followers.
- Letting disputing parties work out their differences by bringing them together and guiding their conversation.
- Giving credit to those who are working hard, and acknowledging when you are wrong and your subordinates are right.
- Remembering that it is better sometimes to go around obstacles than to waste time trying to plow through them.
- Remembering that your war is won not just by strategy but by implementing it with hard fighting.
- Choosing as your chief subordinates those who desire responsibility and take risks, and not being afraid to remove a supervisor when necessary.
- Encouraging innovation and remembering that the best leaders never stop learning and developing.
- Surrounding yourself with people who really know their business, not people who are "yes men."
- Remembering that if you are a good leader, "when your work is done, your aim fulfilled, your people will say, we did this ourselves."

Principles of Communication

Lincoln wrote his own speeches, which are regarded as "masterpieces of poetic and artistic expression." He was an eloquent speaker who could raise the emotions of his audience. He was just as effective off the cuff as he was with a speech he had written in advance. He prepared himself thoroughly for every kind of speaking event.

“By being compassionate and kind rather than malicious or vengeful, a leader will make fewer enemies for himself and his organization and will thereby create more supporters, more dedicated 'soldiers' to aid in the overall corporate mission.”

Lincoln also turned to humor to deal with the stress of the Presidency and the war. "I tell you the truth," he once related to a friend, "when I say that a funny story, if it has the element of genuine wit, has the same effect on me that I suppose a good square drink of whiskey has on an old tippler. It puts new life into me. The fact is, I have always believed that a good laugh was good for both the mental and the physical digestion." Another time he said, quite simply: "I laugh because I must not weep – that's all, that's all."

“In 1864, he said, 'Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this time, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, a bad and as good.'”

He realized how persuasive stories could be. Once, during a conversation, he said, "They say I tell a great many stories. I reckon I do, but I have learned from long experience that plain people, take them as they run, are more easily influenced through the medium of a broad and humorous illustration than in any other way."

“Lincoln handled...defamation in several different ways. Most often, he would simply ignore the attacks. This was particularly true of those times in the midst of political campaigns when most of the slander was petty and utterly ridiculous in nature. He had not time for it. He was too busy trying to win a war.”

The Lincoln Principles concerning communication include:

- Being your organization's best "stump speaker."
- Remembering that extemporaneous speaking is your best road to the public.
- Using a variety of body language when you speak.
- Letting your wit be evident in your speaking.
- Influencing people through conversation, storytelling, and humor.
- Remembering that people are more influenced by a humorous illustration than by anything else.
- Preaching a vision and continually reaffirming it.

Epilogue

Although Lincoln didn't intend to significantly change the office of president, that is exactly what he did. He was extremely self-confident and possessed enormous persuasive and political skills that he had developed over his lifetime. The transformation of the presidency came about as a consequence of his leadership during the civil war, and his ability to cultivate passion and trust in all of his followers, while immersing himself in the details of the war effort. Lincoln routinely practiced nearly all of the "revolutionary thinking techniques" that have been preached to industry in the last ten to fifteen years. Ahead of his time, President Abraham Lincoln "can be looked to as the ideal model for desirable, effective leadership...a transforming leader."

“While being a model of consistency Lincoln was also uncommonly flexible. He was a leader who would not and did not limit himself.”

Lincoln's mission was "the American experiment," the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. His goal was the "elevation of men," and he opposed anything that would degrade humanity, especially slavery. Slavery was at the heart of the South's attempted separation from the Union. Lincoln focused on the degradation of slavery by strongly opposing it and appealing to "the better angels of our nature." In this way, he was able to mobilize his followers, uniting them in a common mission.

Abraham Lincoln, during the most difficult period in U.S. history, "almost single-handedly preserved the American concept of government. He did this with a natural and intuitive manner in leading people that was at least a century ahead of his time.

About the Author

Donald T. Phillips has worked in the business world for many years, mostly in large corporations. He began researching this book in 1983 and has since become an independent Lincoln scholar.
