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Leading at the Inflection Point

Abraham Lincoln, Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Doris Kearns Goodwin's recent book, *Team of Rivals* (Simon & Schuster 2005), offers two excellent lessons for leadership, one that Goodwin specifically set out to describe, and one that is embedded in her writing.

The book is billed as being about how Abraham Lincoln drew into his 1861 Cabinet his two most vociferous and in some ways difficult rivals for the presidential nomination in 1860. However, it is also about how he relentlessly created opportunity from military and political defeats.

The answers to these questions have much relevance to the ability to rise above the flow of current events and issues, to see the larger picture and to capitalize upon it. They show the intersection of emotional intelligence (EQ) and leadership, what we characterize as *Leading at the Inflection Point*[™].

In this newsletter we will discuss the first lesson and how it so clearly demonstrates key lessons in emotional intelligence for leaders, while our summer newsletter will look at the relevance of Lincoln's experience to *Leading at the Inflection Point*[™].

Lincoln's two main rivals for the Republican nomination for President in 1860, Salmon Chase and William Henry Seward, had fought for political supremacy of the Republican Party for years, although in both cases,

their tussles with Lincoln only began around 1858, as Lincoln's political star began to rise nationally. In Chase's case, he had continually exemplified an inability to rise above his presidential ambitions – and continued to do so while Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln. Seward came into Lincoln's Cabinet as Secretary of State convinced that he was sufficiently intelligent and powerful that he could become the President *de facto*, reducing Lincoln to a figurehead role.

In the end, Lincoln extracted remarkable effort from Chase in his successfully financing the Union's war effort, before accepting Chase's resignation in 1865 in a way that was most helpful to Lincoln, and not at all helpful to Chase. Seward, on the other hand, became Lincoln's closest confidant, in many ways an alter ego, and the two were loyal, steadfast friends at the time of Lincoln's death.

Let's look at how, in embracing his rivals for the presidency and capitalizing on their skills, Lincoln displayed the four types of emotional intelligence essential for any leader:¹

Self-Awareness: *The ability to accurately perceive one's own emotions and stay aware of them as they happen. This includes keeping on top of how one tends to respond to specific situations and people.* While there is little direct comment in Goodwin's

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work on this attribute as it relates to embracing his rivals, Lincoln demonstrated this quality in spades in his awareness and handling of his own melancholy (or as some would have it, his “depression”). Apparently, he was extraordinarily capable of sensing his own moods, and Goodwin cites numerous examples of where he was able to rise above it by subsequent interventions with others to make them aware of his weakness. A memorable example was in his note to a cavalryman, whose request was turned down by Lincoln: The following day Lincoln writes to the man that he (Lincoln) “had been a brute,” and would do what he could to help the fellow.

Self-Management: *The ability to use awareness of one’s emotions to stay flexible and positively direct behavior. This means managing emotional reactions to all situations and people.* One of the most powerful themes in this work is Lincoln’s ability to deal with his emotions in a positive manner, and create opportunity where others only saw humiliation, chagrin, and despair. When Salmon Chase engaged in outrageous acts calculated to attempt to secure the presidential nomination in 1864, Lincoln would only say publicly that he was sure what Chase was doing was misinterpreted, while privately saying that he could endure Chase’s machinations because he did not think in the end he, Lincoln, would be harmed. AND, he continuously stated that he needed Chase, because only Chase was capable of generating the financing necessary to finance the Civil War.

Social Awareness: *The ability to accurately pick up on emotions in other people and understand what is really going on. This often means understanding what other people are thinking and feeling even if one doesn’t feel the same way.* Chase again provides a good example. Lincoln properly understood that Chase was, had been, and would probably

continue to be consumed with “presidential fever,” and that in fact it was his greatest weakness.

Relationship Management: *The ability to use awareness of one’s emotions and the emotions of others to manage interactions successfully. This includes clear communication and the ability to handle conflict.* Thus, for the day he might need it, Lincoln stockpiled at least three resignation letters from Chase, refusing each one, but also holding them against the day in 1865 when, to Chase’s shock, he accepted the latter’s fourth resignation letter, and used the other three with his other cabinet members to “seal the deal,” in terms of making them realize what he had put up with.

What does one make of Lincoln’s demonstration of these four dimensions of emotional intelligence? Perhaps the most important lesson is in understanding that Lincoln demonstrated these qualities when he was under great fire as being a weak, incompetent President, unfit to lead the country in the time of war. In our terms, he demonstrated *Leading at the Inflection Point™*, that is, the ability to exhibit these characteristics at the time when they are most needed, but often in shortest supply. It was this quality that often won over many of his most wary critics, from Seward and Chase, to Seward’s campaign manager, Thariow Weed, Horace Greeley, and to the noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.

But his ability to deal with the most profound adversity was also astounding, as we shall address in our summer newsletter...

¹ Goleman, Daniel, Boyatzis, Richard and McKee, Annie. 2002. *Primal Leadership*: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2002.