

Abraham Lincoln: Lessons in Leadership—Part II

In our Spring 2006 newsletter we explored Abraham Lincoln's remarkable ability to rise above personal rivalry to embrace his bitterest opponents for the 1860 Presidential nomination, and make those rivals the cornerstone of his very successful war-time cabinet (if you missed this newsletter, you can find it at www.cookcompany.com/newsletters.htm). We have used Doris Kearns Goodwin's recent book, "Team of Rivals" as our text for relating Lincoln's leadership achievements to the modern-day emphasis on emotional intelligence and to our phrase, *Leading @ the Inflection Point™*.

Who Was This Man?

Age 22 – Failed in business
 Age 23 – Ran for legislature, defeated
 Age 27 – Had a probable nervous breakdown
 Age 39 – Defeated for Congress
 Age 46 – Defeated for Senate
 Age 47 – Defeated for Vice President
 Age 49 – Defeated for Senate
 Age 51 – Elected President of the United States!

Most of us have seen the above litany and know that it is part of the track record of the remarkable man known as Abraham Lincoln. I suspect that most of us also have found it remarkable that a man who had faced that many failures was able to rise so far above them.

But that turns out to be only part of the story. For Abraham Lincoln actually used failure to create value and opportunity, both for himself and for what today we would call his "stakeholders" – those who relied on him, from individual soldiers to the populations of both the North and the South. Today we will explore the lessons that his behaviors and approach have for today's leaders. In short, we will suggest that he is an extraordinary example of *Leading @ the Inflection Point™*.

Let us review some examples of Lincoln's courage and resilience and examine how they exemplify that phrase.

The Battle of Bull Run

On Sunday, July 21, 1861, Union troops attacked Southern troops near Manassas, Virginia in the first major battle of the war. The outcome was so little

in doubt that Washingtonians filled picnic baskets and congregated at Centreville, Virginia (about ten miles away) to witness what they thought would be an easy victory. At 4:30 that afternoon a Union telegraph operator proclaimed that "the Union Army has achieved a glorious victory."

But by sundown it was clear that, instead, the Union had suffered a shocking defeat. In one short day, Union belief that this was going to be an easy war, that Southerners could not stand up to Union forces, and that the Union had superior army leadership, were all dashed. What did Lincoln do?

He apparently did not sleep that night. But, according to Goodwin, he did "begin drafting a memo incorporating the painful lessons of Bull Run into a coherent future military policy." He instituted a blockade of all Southern ports, anticipating that European interests might see the defeat as a good time to trade with the South. And he immediately reorganized the command of the Army of the Potomac.

As Walt Whitman said, "it is enough . . . to send him . . . to the memory of all future time, that he endured that hour, that day, bitterer than gall . . . that it did not conquer him – that he . . . resolved to lift himself and the Union out of it."

Leadership Lessons:

- It is at the time of greatest crisis that leaders truly lead.

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- True leadership is not so much about charisma as it is about identifying those key initiatives that must be undertaken to succeed going forward, and ensuring they are done right.
- To those one is leading, the *example* of pushing forward with these initiatives may be more important than either the prosecution of the actions themselves or words of resolve alone.
- Note also that Lincoln had the emotional, physical and mental resources to act when this inflection point occurred. As a CEO of my acquaintance recently related, "Early in my career I was once told by my then boss (when he discovered me working at 9:00 at night and found that I had been doing so for several weeks), 'What's the matter, is the job too big for you?' I got the message!" Despite the crushing workload, Lincoln always found time for a walk, for time with old friends, for a carriage ride with his wife. Thus fortified, he had the reserves to deal with the inflection points when they occurred.

The Peninsula Campaign

In April and May of 1862, General McClellan's Army of the Potomac sailed to Fort Monroe, Virginia, and from there engaged in a series of offensive moves up the peninsula between the York and James Rivers toward Richmond, Virginia.

Unfortunately for the Union, through a series of self-imposed delays for which he had been subsequently branded for posterity, McClellan lost his advantage, and after a series of defeats, had to retreat steadily southward, to Harrison's Landing on the James River by July 1, 1862. Again, high hopes in the North had been dashed, and the consequences were serious.

Borrowing became more difficult for the Union, the public was restless, and there were rumors that Britain would recognize the South. As one commentator noted, "We are in the depths now, permeated by disgust, saturated with gloomy thinking." How did Lincoln react?

First, despite the public's concern and the fact that his Secretary of War had recently shut recruiting offices (assuming they would not be needed), he called for more troops. But it was *how* Lincoln did it that was really impressive – with the advice of Secretary Seward, he planted a request with the Governors of the North so that they appeared to be appealing to him as President to raise more troops. Thus, he engineered broader *ownership* of the need for more troops, more money, and more sacrifice by the Union.

Leadership Lessons:

- Creating broad ownership of actions is more important than being perceived as the genius who first conceived of those actions.

- Truly understanding what his stakeholders wanted (and in some cases, needed), gave Lincoln the opportunity to turn a difficult decision already made into a political non-event.
- Again, taking action in the face of adversity and in a thoughtful way projects true leadership.

Addressing Criticism of Edwin Stanton

In early August, 1862, Lincoln responded to a drumbeat of criticism of his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Stanton was accused by conservatives of being brusque and domineering, particularly in supposedly withholding troops from General McClellan (who was never satisfied that he had enough troops, even when he outnumbered the enemy by 3 or 4 to 1).

The occasion was a Union rally on the Capitol steps in Washington, for which even government departments had been closed. It is unclear whether Lincoln was even going to be asked to speak, but speak he did. He started by stating that he wished to address, "a matter in which we have heard some other persons blamed for what I did myself."

Then, referring to Secretary Stanton, he stated, "I believe he is a brave and able man, and stand here, as justice requires me to do, to take upon myself what has been charged to the Secretary of War."

Leadership Lessons:

- The leader gains more by taking responsibility and gains more credit for voicing what his stakeholders believe anyway – that he is ultimately responsible.
- The leader also gains more loyalty from his "troops" by "taking the hit" than by sacrificing his direct subordinates to popular opinion. Does this always save the leader? Absolutely not, but *Leading @ the Inflection Point™* is about what is the right action for leaders to take, not what in the short term may save their jobs.

Abraham Lincoln was truly a great man (today we would say "a great person"). And an enormous part of his greatness was being a truly great leader. He exemplifies in almost every dimension what *Leading@ the Inflection Point™* represents. He embodies the emotional intelligence we look for in a leader today, with the intelligence that we have always looked for in a leader, and above all else, the courage to press forward at the darkest hours of an institution's existence.

Few leaders of for-profit or non-profit organizations – if any – face the challenges Lincoln faced. The inflection points he repeatedly overcame would each themselves have overcome most men and women. But he overcame them. Given the lesser challenges most of our leaders today face, we should demand those same qualities Lincoln demonstrated.