

Lincoln and leadership flashcard



Review of Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times by Donald T. Phillips In the preface to Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times (1992), author Donald Phillips relates the surprise he felt when, beginning his research into the leadership style of the man most would agree was our country's greatest leader, he realized that he was plowing untilled ground. No one had yet written a book on Lincoln and leadership; as a matter of fact, the Lincoln Library, which keeps an exhaustive inventory of works about our 16th president, could only find three articles dealing with Lincoln and leadership.

Phillips had been inspired by descriptions of the president visiting his generals on the battlefield; the president's practices seemed to parallel what Phillips was learning about management and leadership, particularly the dictum that executives should leave their "Ivory Towers" and "get to know their people" (p. ix). What he had seen in his reading about Lincoln was what he felt was missing in much of the abstract discussions of leadership: "tangible examples from a widely recognized great leader" (p. xii).

This book brings those examples to the fore, and extracts from them specific principles – many of them in Lincoln's own words – that leaders can apply in their own "tough times." Lincoln on Leadership is divided into four parts: People, Character, Endeavor, and Communication. Each part contains 3-5 chapters with titles that emphasize the leadership principles that, according to Phillips, guided Lincoln's behavior. While this organization is helpful, it is also the case that the book is organized at least somewhat chronologically, a parallel structure that makes it both more enjoyable to read and, conversely, difficult to dip into.

Anyone who is familiar with American history knows the basic story, of course, but the author shows how the effects of Lincoln's decisions come together to form a pattern of exemplary leadership. However, if someone is inclined to mine the text for specific lessons, Phillips caters to them by offering a bulleted recap of "Lincoln Principles" at the end of each chapter. In the introduction, Phillips proposes that we should look to our most effective and inspiring leaders if we "hope to understand how leadership really works" (p. 4).

Phillips offers a traits-based comparison of Lincoln with other great leaders. He also briefly covers the "leadership qualities" – Lincoln's natural leadership traits – that are acknowledged by most: honesty and integrity; empathy; a devotion to individual rights; and extraordinary communication skills. Phillips describes the situation Lincoln encounters at the beginning of his first term. Seven states had seceded and Jefferson Davis had already been sworn in as the president of the Confederate States of America.

No actions had been taken by Congress or outgoing President James Buchanan; the South had already seized almost every fort, arsenal and federal agency in their territory, and the majority of the Mississippi River was in its control. The Union army was tiny (16, 000 soldiers) and without effective leadership. As Phillips notes, Lincoln had almost no relevant experience – he was by any definition an untested leader. He had never held an executive leadership position, had only served one term in the U. S. House, and had near-zero military experience.

Truly, there was little indication that Lincoln had the qualities to be not only one of our most effective leaders, but a man who is almost universally acknowledged as an exemplar, the very definition of a leader. Part 1, “People,” begins with a chapter entitled “Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops.” Lincoln practiced “management by walking around” (MBWA); Phillips refers to the classic management book *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982), where this aspect of management was first named.

Lincoln was an inveterate wanderer, and when he could not get away he allowed almost everyone complete access to him at the White House. According to Nicolas and Hay, Lincoln’s personal secretaries, Lincoln spent 75% of his time meeting with people. Often, he would meet with members of his cabinet on an individual basis instead of waiting for their regularly scheduled Tuesday and Friday staff meetings, and he left the White House daily to visit the War Department whose telegraph office was a regular stop, as was Congress: he was one of the few Presidents to ever attend a full working session of the Senate.

Lincoln wanted the most current information – unfiltered – in order to act swiftly and decisively, and he needed, as the title of the second chapter states, to “Build Strong Alliances.” Lincoln faced many obstacles when he arrived in Washington; several of those were within his own party and cabinet. He had asked two former primary rivals, Stanton and Seward, to act as his Secretaries of War and State, respectively. He needed their experience and expertise, but he also had to demonstrate his abilities and leadership, firmly establishing himself as the leader in word and deed.

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During the first year of Lincoln's term, Seward often attempted to overstep his boundaries. When Seward threatened war against Great Britain for collaborating with the South, Lincoln cautioned, "One war at a time": a great piece of wisdom for any leader to consider. The third section in this part, "Persuade Rather than Coerce," examines a cornerstone of Lincoln's leadership style. Seldom did he ever deliver direct orders to his subordinates. Instead, he offered suggestions, encouragement, and advice.

Lincoln's strategies for getting the most out of his people were "openness, empowerment, and coaching" (p. 41). His goal was always to bring out the best in his generals and his cabinet members, and he found that a personal conversation, often accompanied by a long, detailed letter, was the best way to get the results he was asking for from his subordinates. "Honesty and Integrity are the Best Policies" is the first chapter in Part 2: "Character." The nickname "Honest Abe" may seem a bit corny to us now, but Lincoln came by this fairly.

His frankness when communicating with the American people about the war, even when things were not going well, allowed him to sustain credibility and, more importantly, motivate the American people to devote their energies to the war effort. Phillips quotes Burns, who states, "Divorced from ethics, leadership is reduced to management and politics to mere technique" (p. 52). By demonstrating his commitment to equality and liberty in word and deed, Lincoln was able to secure his followers' commitment to these principles, as well; they became shared values, "owned" by the organization as a whole.

In Chapter Five, entitled “ Never Act Out of Vengeance or Spite,” Phillips argues that kindness was an essential part of Lincoln’s personality, noting that the president created an atmosphere of safety that encouraged openness and risk: “ Lincoln ... understood that if people were going to come to him with ideas, suggestions, and better ways of making things work, he had to provide the climate to allow it” (p. 58). In addition, Lincoln granted more pardons than any President before or since. Sherman wrote that the “ President found it very hard to hang spies” (p. 60).

His implied suggestion to Sherman that CSA President Jefferson Davis be allowed to escape, rather than arrested, is consistent with his overall sense of kindness – and shrewdness. This was also the case in Lincoln’s treatment of deserters, whom he often pardoned; it was better to have a live, repentant and thankful soldier than a dead one. A closely related principle, “ Have the Courage to Handle Unjust Criticism” is the title of Chapter Six. No president was more slandered and attacked than Lincoln.

Phillips notes that Lincoln never feared criticism, nor was he swayed when popular (or at least vocal) opinion was against him. Facing many crowds that were either openly hostile or indifferent to his anti-slavery platform during the historical Lincoln-Douglas debates (Lincoln was defeated by pro-slavery Democrat Stephen A. Douglas in an 1858 Senate race), Lincoln told his concerned friends, “ I am not going to be terrified by an excited populace, and hindered from speaking my honest sentiments upon this infernal subject of human slavery” (p. 69).

Lincoln tried to avoid reading anything critical about him in the press, and in the rare case that he did, developed the following practice: he wrote a long letter, defending himself or the criticized decision in detail, and tucked it away – never mailing it. With his high-pitched voice, awkward posture, and generally unassuming carriage and appearance, Lincoln is not the model of a “charismatic” leader; however, his troops always met him with cheers when he visited them in the field, and scores of people who spoke with him or saw him in person were intensely moved.

Chapter Seven, entitled “Be a Master of Paradox,” examines these and other such opposing qualities as Lincoln’s consistency/flexibility; his being a victim of horrible slander while at the same time being wildly popular with his followers; his qualities of trust and compassion, which were contrasted by his often being demanding and tough; and his roles as both risk-taker/innovator and patient, calculating planner. Part 3: “Endeavor,” begins with a chapter entitled “Exercise a Strong Hand – Be Decisive.”

Lincoln faced absolute gridlock when he took office, and his ability to make decisions that cut right through a morass of inaction is particularly inspiring. For example, his decision to re-provision Fort Sumter, as opposed to abandoning it, led the South to fire the first shots of the Civil War, giving Lincoln, and the Union, the moral high ground. In addition, by provisioning it when he did, during a congressional recess, Lincoln gave himself three months to act – reorganizing the military, putting money and materials into the war effort – without having to ask Congress for approval: a very deft executive move.

The chapter “Lead by Being Led” shows how one of Lincoln’s greatest strengths was his ability to choose the right people to execute his plans, act as sounding boards, and to come up with innovative ideas of their own.

Lincoln liked to have subordinates who would take the lead – like Grant and Sherman – but he also maintained control, making sure their decisions followed his general direction; if they deviated too far from his plan, he would gently put them back on course.

In Chapter 10, “Set Goals and Be Results-Oriented,” Phillips notes that Lincoln was a hard worker and ambitious – he was a small business owner, a postmaster, a surveyor, and later a lawyer and politician. As president, he united his followers with a shared vision of preserving the Union and achieving the end of slavery, and he focused on concrete, short-term goals that could be accomplished. He took the war one battle at a time.

These goals weren’t always shared by his subordinates: one area where he disagreed with his generals, until Grant, was in his focus on Lee; Lincoln felt that defeating Lee’s army, not capturing the Confederate capital, was the key to victory. “Keep Searching Until You Find Your Grant,” Chapter 11, is the longest chapter in the book, and one of the most interesting. One area where Lincoln is often criticized is his search for a commanding general.

From 1861 to early 1864, Lincoln went through what is referred to as his “parade” of generals; he was searching for an aggressive tactician whose motivation to succeed match Lincoln’s own. Phillips compares these short tenures – three to five months each – to the “honeymoon periods” for new managers/leaders in corporations. Lincoln did not have time for extended

honeymoons, and when it became clear that a particular general was not the leader he needed, he was replaced.

It was not until Lincoln identified Grant – first giving him the Department of the West in mid-1863, then making him General-in-Chief in March, 1864 – that he found the leader capable of completing his goal of destroying Lee’s army. Phillips notes that “ aggressive leaders tend to choose employees in their own image” (p. 136), and along with Grant came two particularly effective generals: Sheridan and Sherman, whose Virginia and Georgia campaigns, respectively, broke both the South’s supply lines and its will to see the war continue.

Still, Lincoln’s vision and leadership was a necessary element even in Grant’s victories: his encouragement and support were essential. Phillips quotes Lincoln as saying “ I, who am not a specially brave man ... have had to sustain the sinking courage of these professional fighters in critical times” (p. 135). Chapter 12’s title, “ Encourage Innovation,” demonstrates how innovation was extremely important to Lincoln, who disliked “ yes men” and tended to appoint subordinates with strong wills and opinions, forcing him to applying critical thinking to his own opinions before making tough decisions.

Lincoln’s open-door policy led to many businessmen and inventors visiting the White House, and he loved attending demonstrations of new weapons and other innovations. It was Lincoln who insisted, over the protestations of the Army’s chief of ordinance, that the Union army order new breech-loading rifles, a technological advancement that help the North win the war “

Communication,” the title of Part 4, is a theme that runs through the entire book.

Chapter 13, “ Master the Art of Public Speaking,” focuses on Lincoln’s ability to both write and deliver messages that are models of effective rhetoric, often reaching the level of literature. His ability to motivate and inspire through carefully chosen words and, according to contemporary accounts, dramatic delivery, was what brought Lincoln to national attention in the first place. Phillips notes, “ Lincoln built credibility by being consistent and clear when speaking to others.

But he did it with more than words; his actions mirrored what he said” (p. 153). Chapter 14, “ Influence People Through Conversation and Storytelling,” focuses on the central role that conversation played in Lincoln’s success as a leader. Throughout the book, particularly in the “ People” section, Phillips emphasizes the role inter-personal communication in leadership; according to Phillips, “ Conversation was Lincoln’s chief form of persuasion and the single most important and effective aspect of his leadership style.

One on one, Lincoln could convince anybody of just about anything” (p. 155). Phillips cites Peters and Austin, who state, “ human beings reason largely by means of stories, not mounds of data. Stories are memorable They teach” (p. 158). Lincoln knew this to be the case, and even once commented on the fact that he used stories to “ a long and useless discussion ... or laborious explanation ... by a story that illustrates my point of view” (p. 159). This section ends with the chapter entitled “ Preach a Vision and Continually Reaffirm It.”

Lincoln consistently re-asserted his vision – preserving the Union and achieving equality for all men – throughout his presidency. Phillips focuses on how the president framed his vision for his audience, the soldiers and citizens who needed to be renewed and revitalized in order to finish the conflict. Phillips uses Lincoln’s best-known, and shortest, speech, to show how Lincoln effected renewal; he “ called on the past, related it to the present, and then used them both to provide a link to the future” (p. 166).

Lincoln knew that renewal was necessary to complete his goals, and continue his followers’ belief in his vision: “ Without question, Lincoln realized what every leader must – that the process of renewal releases the critical human talent and energy that is necessary to insure success” (p. 168). The afterword, added in 2009, explores Lincoln’s actions in dealing with financial crisis. With war looming in 1860, foreign investors pulled out of American markets; southern banks defaulted on their loans from banks in the North. James Buchanan left Lincoln with a \$75 million budget deficit, which would balloon to \$3. 8 billion by the end of the war.

Lincoln countered this dire situation with innovation, creating, among other institutions, the IRS and a national banking system. Conclusions Phillips points out several times that Lincoln’s character was evident in his ability to make tough and often unpopular decisions because he knew they were the right thing to do. He writes, “ Lincoln tempered his unusually intense drive to achieve with an equally strong capacity to care,” pointing out that, “ many leaders are unable to combine these two principles effectively” (p. 177).

This caring capacity extended to the South, as well, as evidenced in his Second Inaugural Address: “ With malice toward none, with charity for all ... let us strive on to finish this work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds ... to do all which may achieve lasting peace among ourselves” (p. 178). Phillips argues that Lincoln’s lack of experience and the state of crisis that existed at his first term’s outset are what make this study of Lincoln particularly relevant to those interested in acquiring effective leadership principles: Lincoln’s success was little short of miraculous.

I agree, and as a lover of history, I was pleased to find that this book was well-researched and filled with fascinating detail. Phillips relied heavily on Lincoln’s papers and the best-known biographies, but also scoured contemporary accounts and the remembrances of those who served on his cabinet, the “ team of rivals,” as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin dubbed them. I am a student of politics, as well, and Lincoln’s surprise win in 1860 (and narrow victory again in 1864) are events on which Phillips’ offers a fresh, original point of view.

Phillips’ rationale for writing this book is that Lincoln in many ways exemplified the skills and behaviors that we currently identify with our modern concept of leadership. Contemporary leaders can see the “ best practices” of their time reflected in Lincoln’s leadership style – he exhibited, in Phillips’ opinion, all of the qualities contemporary executives should strive toward. Consequently, the most effective aspect of Lincoln on Leadership is how it connects Lincoln’s “ principles” – both declared and observed through an analysis of his behaviors – with contemporary writing on leadership.

I became aware of several authors who I would like to read more of, particularly Burns and Peters; I would think that some who might read this book purely for the leadership aspects might also be encouraged to do more research in the other direction, as Phillips does an excellent job of conveying Lincoln's fascinating character. I found Lincoln on Leadership to be a surprisingly insightful book, and I'd recommend it to anyone who wants to look beyond the "great man" myth of our 16th president and into the thoughts, feelings, and, most importantly, principles that guided his actions.