Lincoln: Inspirational Leadership Personified

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To inspire, or to fill another person’s heart and mind with an urge to act when they can make a difference or create solutions when they can solve a problem, is instrumental to true leadership. Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of the United States, utilized this concept as he led our nation through the Civil War and to reunification. The inspirational leader believes that their role is to serve people, help them grow professionally, and ignite a passion that will intrinsically drive the members of the team (Kerfoot, 2002). Lincoln achieved each of these ideals as he led the American people, both military personnel and civilians, through one of the most difficult times in American history. As he discovered throughout his service to the nation during the Civil War, encouraging the development of personal strengths, coupled with inspiring each individual to have their own passion for the team’s vision, will result in an enthusiastic and unstoppable team. Utilizing these beliefs as an inspirational leader, he was able to bring together generals who were each a leader in their own right; and therefore, they were able to defeat Southern troops (Phillips, 1992).

**Service to Others**

The inspirational leader seeks opportunities to serve others rather than operating within an agenda focused on self-promotion. They are driven by a sincere belief in the importance of their work and its contribution to the world around them. As described by Phillips (1992), Lincoln’s work during his presidency and the manner in which he accomplished each goal were all firmly rooted in his belief in the unalienable rights of each individual. Inspirational leaders such as Lincoln have an undeniable love for what they do and a sincere regard for the people who work with them. Their passion is obvious and contagious. Their excitement for their purpose attracts people to their team. Their strong inclination to serve others keeps people on their team. Lincoln believed strongly in leadership by the Golden Rule. He treated others in a
manner he would want to be treated, and in doing so attracted followers through persuasion rather than coercion (Phillips, 1992). This philosophy was made apparent to Americans during Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

> With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. (Lincoln, 1865, para 8)

Inspirational leaders are caring individuals who seek to instill in their followers a dedication to the mission of the team that promotes a commitment to making a difference in the lives of others (Kerfoot, 2002). They inspire those around them to make their own very individual contributions to the overall goal of the team. Lincoln understood that people wanted to believe that they could make a difference and even more importantly, that they wanted to believe it was their idea to do so (Phillips, 1992). This is demonstrated in his preference for using the plural pronoun “we” rather than the singular one “I” in his Presidential addresses, in which he underscored his commitment and the need for the collective effort of the nation to achieve the goal of protecting the rights of the individual (Field, 2011).

**Nurturing the Professional Growth of Team Members**

In concert with the inspirational leader’s desire to serve is their need to nurture the professional growth of each member of their team. By helping team members discover and develop their strengths and talents, effective leaders demonstrate their sincere appreciation for the individuals who comprise their team rather than merely their contribution to the mission of the team. Inspirational leadership may even help a member of the team discover a talent they did
not know they had. Abraham Lincoln demonstrated his appreciation for the strategy employed by Ulysses S. Grant during the capture of Vicksburg in a letter he wrote to the general. According to Phillips (1992), although he had not agreed with Grant’s initial strategy, he knew it was important to acknowledge his success, thereby encouraging him to continue with his “aggressive style, which, of course, is exactly what Lincoln wanted” (p. 104).

Inspirational leaders display a confidence in the abilities of their team which fosters an atmosphere of trust and respect. Mutual trust and respect create an environment in which risk taking and developing out of the box solutions are safe. This breeds excitement for the mission, inspiring a committed and enthusiastic team. The team will not simply be limited by the original vision of the leader. Lincoln accomplished his mission by being very decisive and encouraging those around him to be inventive in their approaches (Phillips, 1992). “In doing so, he not only got things moving, he also gained commitment from a wide array of individuals who were excited at the prospect of seeing their ideas implemented” (p. 137).

**Ignite a Passion in Team Members**

The inspirational leader does not merely try to motivate, but ignite a passion in their team. Motivation will wane based on the presence or absence of some external reward or punishment. Conversely, passion is fueled by an intrinsic motivation that is sustainable because it is not linked to an external stimulation or situation. Passion is personal, contagious, and self-sustaining. Passion is built upon the belief that what one does matters. That belief in an individual’s ability to make a difference makes the team’s mission personally significant to its members. Once an objective is personal, a team will not require external motivation. They will work towards the goal with or without the leader’s influence.
In this way, leaders distinguish themselves by the influence they have on the “discretionary” effort of the members of their groups (Wallis, 2002, p. 61). Inspirational leaders invigorate the dreams and hopes of their group by exciting them with the mission of the team. Each member of the team is intrinsically driven to achieve the mission. The team is driven by a collective passion for the mission. In the words of Donald Phillips (1992), Lincoln had a clear understanding of this phenomenon and utilized it to his benefit during his tenure as President.

While it is true that Lincoln strategically and purposefully asserted his vision, it’s also important to realize that doing so fit naturally into his overall leadership philosophy. Effective visions and organizational mission statements can’t be *forced* upon the masses. Rather, they must be set in motion by means of *persuasion*. The people must accept and implement them wholeheartedly and without reservation. When this is achieved, it is always done with enthusiasm, commitment, and pride. Moreover, truly accepted visions tend to foster innovation, risk-taking, empowerment, and delegation. (p. 164)

Once again, Lincoln accomplished this ideal during his Presidency through his writings and speeches, all of which focused on “we” rather than “I”. Lincoln challenged Americans to reconsider who they were in a time of unrest and national change (Field, 2011). According to Field (2011), Lincoln emerged “as a great leader in large measure because of his beliefs about union and an inclusive vision of American nationhood” (p. 54). This is best illustrated by Lincoln’s own words during the Gettysburg Address of 1863.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly
resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (Lincoln, 1863, para 4)

He successfully attempted to inspire people into action by persuading them to take ownership and play their individual part in preserving the ideal America set forth by the Founding Fathers (Phillips, 1992).

**Conclusion**

Inspiring others to recognize a situation that requires action and empowering them to act is the mark of a great leader. True leadership exists when you help the members of the team discover and use talents and skills they did not know they possessed. Team members will be able to grow and develop their talents under the leadership of a great and inspirational leader. Through the personal growth of individuals, a tenacious team with a strong vision of their goal and a plan for accomplishment will emerge. Each of these ideals is evident in the leadership and subsequent accomplishments of Abraham Lincoln. He clearly recognized that inspiration is the flame that ignites passion and with passion comes the belief that no goal is insurmountable.

He lifted people out of their everyday selves and into a higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness. He obtained extraordinary results from ordinary people by instilling purpose in their endeavors. He was open, civil, tolerant, and fair, and he maintained a respect for the dignity of all people at all times…..Abraham Lincoln was the essence of leadership. (Phillips, 1992, p. 173)

Lincoln understood well the power of inspiring and igniting passion in his followers in the course of his leadership. He passionately believed in the rights of all individuals and gently persuaded and empowered the American people to join him in fighting for this cause. He was
the heart and soul of this early civil rights movement. In the words of Schwartz and Schuman (2005), “If Lincoln were removed from this story, its moral content would be less moving, less powerful; its moral essence less compelling. Lincoln is ideal for studying American memory because he remains a prophet of American civil religion” (p. 186). He understood the power of persuasion rather than force, respect rather than condescension, and suggestion rather than orders. He understood the power of the common man, when inspired to act, to right a societal wrong.
References


