

Eleven Leadership Lessons from Abraham Lincoln

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In this *Harvard Business Review* article (excerpted from a new book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, Simon and Schuster), historian Doris Kearns Goodwin analyzes Abraham Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Here are the precepts she draws from Lincoln's fateful decision – broadly applicable to leaders in other venues:

- *Acknowledge when failed policies demand a change in direction.* In mid-1862, Union forces had suffered serious setbacks, and Lincoln was convinced that keeping the nation together required a dramatic change in strategy. Freeing 3.5 million enslaved Americans in the southern states was such a move, reflecting both military strategy and Lincoln's belief that "slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy."

- *Anticipate contending viewpoints.* Before presenting a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet in July 1862, Lincoln thought he knew what the reactions would be – his "team of rivals" advisors represented the full spectrum of opinions. Nonetheless, there were several surprises, including cabinet members who remained silent.

- *Know when to hold back and when to move forward.* One cabinet member argued that Lincoln should wait "until the eagle of victory takes its flight" and then "hang your proclamation around its neck." Lincoln hadn't anticipated that argument, agreed, and put the Proclamation on hold. When the tide turned in the Union's favor at Antietam in September, Lincoln convened the cabinet to discuss the issue once again.

- *Set an example.* "How was it possible to coordinate these inordinately prideful, ambitious, quarrelsome, jealous, supremely gifted men to support a fundamental shift in the purpose of the war?" asks Goodwin. "The best answer can be found in Lincoln's compassion, self-awareness, and humility. He never allowed his ambition to consume his kindheartedness."

- *Understand the emotional needs of the team.* Lincoln was especially careful to nurture close relationships with his secretaries of state and war, dropping in on them for dinners and evening chats. Careful to avoid the appearance of favoritism, he made a point of spending private time with other cabinet members, praising the work they did ("Everyone likes a compliment," he observed), writing notes, and at one point putting his arms on one secretary's shoulders while patiently explaining a decision that had gone against him.

- *Refuse to let past resentments fester.* The most dramatic example of this was with the secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, who had insulted Lincoln early in his legal career and had a personality that clashed with Lincoln's. The president put aside his pique and appointed Stanton to a key position, and over time, Stanton came to revere, even love, Lincoln.

- *Control angry impulses.* When Lincoln was furious at someone, he would write what he called a "hot" letter containing all his rage. He would then put the letter aside and return to it when he had calmed down. Twentieth-century historians going through his papers found scores

of these letters with the notation, “never sent and never signed.” He counseled others to use the same approach, and was forgiving when others vented at him, realizing that they hadn’t learned this technique.

- *Protect colleagues from blame.* Lincoln took full responsibility, even when cabinet members were attacked for mistakes they’d made. His generous support of his colleagues paved the way for their support of the Emancipation Proclamation, even though several had major misgivings. “When it counted most,” says Goodwin, “they presented a united front.”

- *Keep promises.* Between the release of the Proclamation on September 22, 1862 and January 1, 1863, when it was to take effect, there was a major Union setback at Fredericksburg and the Republicans lost many seats in the mid-term elections. Fears were raised that the Proclamation would foment race wars in the South, cause Union officers to resign their commands, and prompt 100,000 Union soldiers to lay down their arms. The abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass knew Lincoln better, saying, “if he has taught us to confide in nothing else, he has taught us to confide in his word.”

- *Gauge sentiment.* Following the Proclamation, there were rumors of desertions from the Union ranks and discontent in the Border states. Some soldiers said they had signed up to save the Union, not to free the slaves. But Lincoln had an accurate sense of public sentiment, and soon emancipation and preserving the Union were seen as inseparably linked.

- *Establish trust.* “The response of the troops,” says Goodwin, “was grounded in the deep trust and loyalty Lincoln had earned among rank-and-file soldiers from the very beginning of the war. In letters they wrote home, accounts of his empathy, responsibility, kindness, accessibility, and fatherly compassion for his extended family were commonplace.”

“Lincoln and the Art of Transformative Leadership” by Doris Kearns Goodwin in *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 2018 (Vol. 96, #5, p. 126-134), <https://bit.ly/2MMB9QC>; see Memo 366 for a summary of a book by a different author on Lincoln, listing other leadership qualities.