

Opinion

## Lincoln On Business Leadership

Dr. Saj-nicole Joni, 05.08.06, 6:00 AM ET



History's greatest political, social and business leaders share common traits that drive their success. In her recent book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster 2005), historian Doris Kearns-Goodwin gives new insight into Lincoln's extraordinary leadership, both in the personal dimension and in his ability to marshal a highly complex and contentious team of rivals and prevail--becoming not only one of the nation's best presidents but one of history's greatest leaders.

I recently met with Kearns-Goodwin to discuss how the leadership qualities she illustrates in *Team of Rivals* apply to business leaders today, the highlights of which are shared in this month's column.

**Saj-Nicole Joni: You have said that fierce ambition was a life-long driving force for Lincoln.**

**Doris Kearns-Goodwin:** Yes. Centrally important to Lincoln's success was the nature of his ambition--a fierce ambition that was, it was said, like an engine that knew no rest, one that was not for office or power, but to accomplish something worthy.

**This reminds me of Jim Collins, who writes, in *Good to Great* (HarperCollins 2001), that the best business leaders are incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is first and foremost for their institutions, not for themselves. In your book, *Team of Rivals*, you take this further. Lincoln cared deeply for the country he was elected to lead, but his ambition was for something that reached beyond country to something that was much more meaningful.**

Lincoln's guiding star was living in a way that was worthy--so worthy that his accomplishments would stand the test of time and be retold long after his life and death. He believed passionately in the idea that this country was one where you could rise to the level of your talent and discipline and that ordinary people could govern themselves.

Protecting this new democratic idea, and the only country at that time in history ever built around this idea, was paramount for Lincoln. He understood that to create an honored reputation that stands the test of time, you have to do right by the largest elements you are dealing with. This clarity, combined with his sense of humor and human compassion, allowed him to deal with lesser levels of concern that might seem against his short-term interests in service of attending to his largest ambition--to grow and preserve democracy for all time.

**This resonates with top business leaders today, who must lead their institutions with vision that goes well beyond their borders or immediate concerns. I find that our best leaders are those whose fiercest ambition is focused beyond themselves and even beyond their institutions--often toward goals and accomplishments that transform and improve some important aspect of life, economic prosperity and society.**

**You detail how Lincoln, like every great leader, put considerable thought and effort into building his team, yet many CEOs would be considered lacking in skill if they put together such a fractious and difficult top team.**

When Lincoln became president, he had beaten out [William] Seward, a highly experienced governor and senator from New York whom most people expected to win; [Salmon] Chase of Ohio; and [Edward] Bates of Missouri. Lincoln stunned the nation when he placed each of these rivals in key positions in his cabinet, each of whom represented a different faction of the party.

It was a totally unprecedented act, particularly since each thought he should have been president instead of Lincoln and each still had presidential ambition. When asked why he had taken the risk of putting his rivals into positions where they could outshine him, he said simply that in this difficult time, "we needed the strongest men of the party in the cabinet. I had no right to deprive the country of their services."

A less courageous and confident man might have surrounded himself with personal supporters who would not question his authority. Lincoln knew that by bringing his rivals and their opposing views into the official "family," he would have to sharpen his thinking on every question. Moreover, if he could keep them working as a team, he would have a shot at keeping the various factions of the North together.

**What qualities were unique to Lincoln that allowed him to get this fractious cabinet to function?**

First, Lincoln understood that inherent in finding the best people, he would be selecting people who were contentious, extremely smart, ambitious and fully formed in their own right. And he was right. Every one of the members of his cabinet was a big, colorful, large character--they were men who were, in a sense, larger than life.

But along with this comes frailty--human frailty, made up of their own ambitions, rivalry, reaching for short-term gains at the expense of the future and other human imperfections. Lincoln saw this, and within generous limits, he was willing to accept this as part of the price of the expertise and results these large, creative individuals would bring to their departments and to the country. He made room for them and gave them a lot of latitude, and even tolerated, with some limits, their rivalries, pettiness and chaotic churning.

**A growing trend for many businesses today, no matter what industry, is the reality that their most important assets are extremely talented, ambitious, productive and creative people. These people are often, as in the time of Lincoln, large characters with human frailties. This implies that one of the most important factors in being an effective leader is the ability to lead this kind of team.**

First and foremost, Lincoln built dissension into his official family and gave his colleagues incentive and room to speak their minds, to disagree with him and others about upcoming decisions. He spent time with them alone and encouraged them to write briefs stating their ideas and positions. He made it clear he would hear them all out, but that in the end, he would make his own decisions.

For example, when Lincoln had finally decided he would issue the Emancipation Proclamation, he called the cabinet together, and in the famous meeting of July 1862, told them of his decision. He acknowledged their input and ideas and said that he was not asking for consensus. [After] the decision was made, he again asked all of them on their thoughts about how to go forward and implement it.

Lincoln understood that the dire crisis and war they were facing was, in fact, a unifying force, one he could count on to help hold the cabinet together. And while he countenanced their disagreements with one another within the White House confines, he let it be known that he did not want to hear them disparaging one another in public.

**While it may seem counterintuitive, it is in times of crisis, of great change, that leaders most need the very best players in the "game-breaker" positions, representing the broadest diversity of views and principled positions. Under the guidance of a great leader, the crisis itself is potentially a positive force for keeping the disharmonious and sometimes chaotic team from devolving into total dysfunction. When the war was won, Lincoln understood that he no longer had this powerful aligning force, and he undertook to create a more harmonious cabinet to lead in his second term.**

In addition, Lincoln was able to concede error and learn from his mistakes. He frequently shouldered responsibility for the failure of his subordinates, and when they succeeded, he willingly granted them the limelight of success. Though a strain of melancholy was part of his nature, Lincoln possessed a remarkable sense of humor and a gift for storytelling that allowed him to defuse tensions and relax his colleagues at difficult moments.

In the end, Lincoln stood for all people in his passion for democracy. He understood that he would not be seen this way from every perspective, and he accepted this in order to lead. If you judge Lincoln by the standard of the abolitionists, as the African-American leader Frederick Douglass later said, he was slow and somewhat indifferent. But if you judge him by the fact that he was president of all the people, and had to attend to their sentiment, he was radical and forward and passionate. He fundamentally understood, under the enormous pressures of complexity and uncertainty, the difference between being an agitator and a visionary leader.

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