

Lincoln on Leadership

Name

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### **Abstract**

*Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* is a book authored by Donald Philips in the year 1992. In the preface, he expresses how he felt surprised at the beginning of the research into the styles of leadership of the man that majority would confess as the greatest leader of the United States; he realized that no any other writer had examined that field. As a matter of fact, nobody had authored a book regarding Lincoln and leadership. Surprisingly, even in the Lincoln library where exhaustive inventory of the 16<sup>th</sup> president's work are kept, there were only three articles of Lincoln and leadership. The inspiration of Philips came from the descriptions of how the president visited his generals when they were on the battlefield. The practices of the president seemed to negate with the principles that Phillips had learned in leadership and management, particularly the expression that it was good that leaders leave their luxurious offices and know their people. Philips felt that the articles written about Lincoln and leadership lacked evident examples from the great leader. Therefore, in his book, he presents tangible examples that are extracted from certain principles that can be applied by leaders when tough times counter, most of them from Lincoln's statements.

### **Introduction**

The book is divided into four segments, namely Character, Endeavor, People, and Communication. Every segment has approximately 3-5 chapters organized in titles that focus on the principles of leadership that guided the behavior of Lincoln, according to Philips. Apart from this organization, the book is also organized in a somewhat parallel structure and chronologically, an aspect that makes it enjoyable to read and hard to dip it. The author exposes

how the impacts of the decisions made by Lincoln joined to create a pattern of excellent leadership. Philips makes the book easier for the people who do not know the basic story of American history by including Lincoln Principles in bullet form at the end of every chapter.

The author proposes at the introduction of the book that it is important to examine the life of the most inspiring and effective leaders if there is any hope of understanding how leadership works. The introductory part of the book also offers a comparison of traits between Lincoln and other renowned leaders. Again, the first pages cover the leadership qualities briefly. These are the natural leadership qualities of Lincoln that are shown such as empathy, extraordinary communication skills, devotion to personal rights, and honesty and integrity. The situation that faced Lincoln at the start of his first presidency term is also discussed. According to the book, Lincoln had close to no related experience, and he was to some extent a leader who had not yet been tested. Before he was elected as the president, he had never been in any position of executive leadership, had only been in the U.S House for one term, and had minimal military experience. There were actually little signs that Lincoln was capable of being a man who is almost acknowledged universally as the best definition of a leader.

The first part of the book is “People”. The chapter entitled “Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops” affirms that Lincoln managed his troops by walking around. Throughout his leadership, Lincoln was a great wanderer and he would allow almost all people the chance to access him in his office. As Hay and Nicolas, the personal secretaries in Lincoln’s office, confessed, 75% of Lincoln’s time was spent meeting with people. He used to meet his cabinet members frequently on an individual basis rather than waiting for the scheduled staff meetings on Tuesday and Friday. He left his office daily to pay a visit to the War Department and he became one among the few Presidents who ever attended a complete working session in

the senate. In his tenure, Lincoln wanted to be the first to have the unfiltered and most current information to enable him act fast and make quick decisions, and he aimed at building strong alliances. There were many obstacles that Lincoln encountered when he went to Washington, some being rooted in his cabinet and party. He had requested Stanton and Seward, his former rivals, to be his secretaries in the War and State departments. He did this because he needed their expertise and experience, and he also wanted to show his leadership and abilities, to firmly establish himself as a leader in both words and actions. Seward often tried to violate the boundaries during Lincoln's first year of his term by threatening war against Great Britain due to their collaboration with the South. Lincoln cautioned him by saying "One war at a time". This is great advice that should be considered by every leader.

The third chapter of the first part states "Persuade Rather than Coerce". This section outlines the main aspect of the leadership style that Lincoln used. He seldom gave his soldiers direct orders. He instead offered encouragement, advice, and suggestions. He used empowerment, coaching, and openness strategies to get the most from his people and he always aimed at bringing out the best his cabinet members and generals had. He realized that a personal conversation, together with a detailed letter, was the best method he could use to achieve the results he needed from his subordinates. According to the book, Lincoln mostly used honesty and integrity policies. He was always frank when talking to the Americans regarding the war. This character enabled him to sustain his credibility even when there were tough times, and more essentially, motivate his citizens to dedicate their efforts to the war. Lincoln was able to make his followers commit themselves to these principles by showing his commitment to liberty and equality in words and actions. He made these two principles shared values that were owned by the entire organization.

As Philips argues in the first part of fifth chapter, kindness formed a greater part of the personality of Lincoln. The former notes that the president always created a safety atmosphere that promoted openness and risk since he understood that it was essential to provide a climate that allowed the people bring to him their suggestions, ideas, and better styles to make things work. Besides, more pardons were granted during his tenure compared to any other era before. It was very hard for the president to hang spies. Lincoln treated deserters well and pardoned them by saying that an alive, thankful, and repentant soldier was better than a dead one. In America's history, Lincoln was the most attacked and slandered president. However, he never feared to be criticized and he never swayed when the opinion of the compact majority was against him. He attempted to avoid reading anything that criticized him to the press. He rarely did so, and whenever he read it, he would write a long letter in his defense or refuting the criticism in detail. He never mailed these letters, but just tucked them away.

When Lincoln took office, he was faced by absolute gridlock, and his capability of making decisions that overcame the morass of inaction was very surprising. Among the greatest strengths of Lincoln was the ability to choose the right people who would be his sounding boards and innovators of ideas for the execution of his plans. Lincoln was impressed to have subordinates who were able to lead, such as Sherman and Grant, though he made sure that he was in control, ensuring that the decisions they made were according to his general directions. Whenever the decisions went against his plan, he would correct them gently. As Philips notes, Lincoln used to work hard and was very ambitious. He began as an entrepreneur, became a postmaster, then a surveyor, before becoming a lawyer and later a politician. However, Lincoln is criticized on one area in his effort of finding a commanding general. He examined his parade

of generals from the year 1861 to 1864 in the search for a tactician who had similar motivation to succeed as his own.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, this book discusses about the life of Abraham Lincoln as the President of America and it is meant to inspire other upcoming leaders to use his skills in leadership. For example, in chapter 12 of the book, it is demonstrated how Lincoln liked innovative subordinates. He disliked subordinates who agreed with everything he said and used to appoint subordinates who had strong opinions and wills, who would force him to use critical thinking to his opinions even before he made tough decisions. The open-door policy he used made many inventors and businessmen visit the White House regularly, and he used to attend conventions where new weapons and innovations were launched. This book is excellent for all readers who wish to lead effectively and efficiently. It offers many insights from the leadership style of Abraham Lincoln.

References

Phillips, D. T. (2009). *Lincoln on leadership: Executive strategies for tough times*. Illinois, U.S.A. : DTP/Companion Books.