

AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE (NSW CHAPTER)
Meeting 10 September 2007

Lincoln on Leadership

The cover of the 1992 book *Lincoln on Leadership – Executive Strategies for Tough Times* by Donald T. Phillips makes the non-too-modest claim that it has become “Clinton’s private bible about how to govern – TIME”.

It has assembled five pages of glowing testimonials from historians, experts and contemporary leaders – a few examples:

“Lucid.....compellinga book not to be missed by anyone who manages people and problems” James M. McPherson author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* and *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*.

“A wonderfully refreshing and interesting way to get across several critical – and timeless – leadership messages” John Scully, Chairman and CEO, Apple Computer Inc.

“This expert, detailed record of [Lincoln’s] leadership qualities not only illustrates the past, it might also help light the way to the future” Mario M. Cuomo, Governor of New York and co-author of *Lincoln on Democracy*.

The author claims to have written the book because he discovered, despite the many books about Lincoln, no one had written a book about Lincoln’s leadership or management philosophy.

Early on the book is not so clear on what it means by leadership. It says: “Since leadership principles are usually expressed rather abstractly, there is a need for simple, concrete illustrations. Tangible examples make the difference; people relate to them. That’s what the study of Lincoln gives us – tangible examples from a widely recognised great leader.” Not until page 162 are we told that “the first dictionary definition of a ‘leader’ describes a primary shoot of a plant, the main artery through which the organism lives and thrives. In much the same way, organisations prosper or die as a result of their leader’s ability to embody and communicate the company’s vision”.

A dimension of the term that emerges through the book is that leaders act for goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers.

The author deals with the subject in four parts: People, Character, Endeavour and Communication:

I. People

- Get out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops
- Build Strong Alliances
- Persuade Rather Than Coerce

II. Character

- Honesty and Integrity Are the Best Policies
- Never Act Out of Vengeance or Spite
- Have the Courage to Handle Unjust Criticism
- Be a Master of Paradox

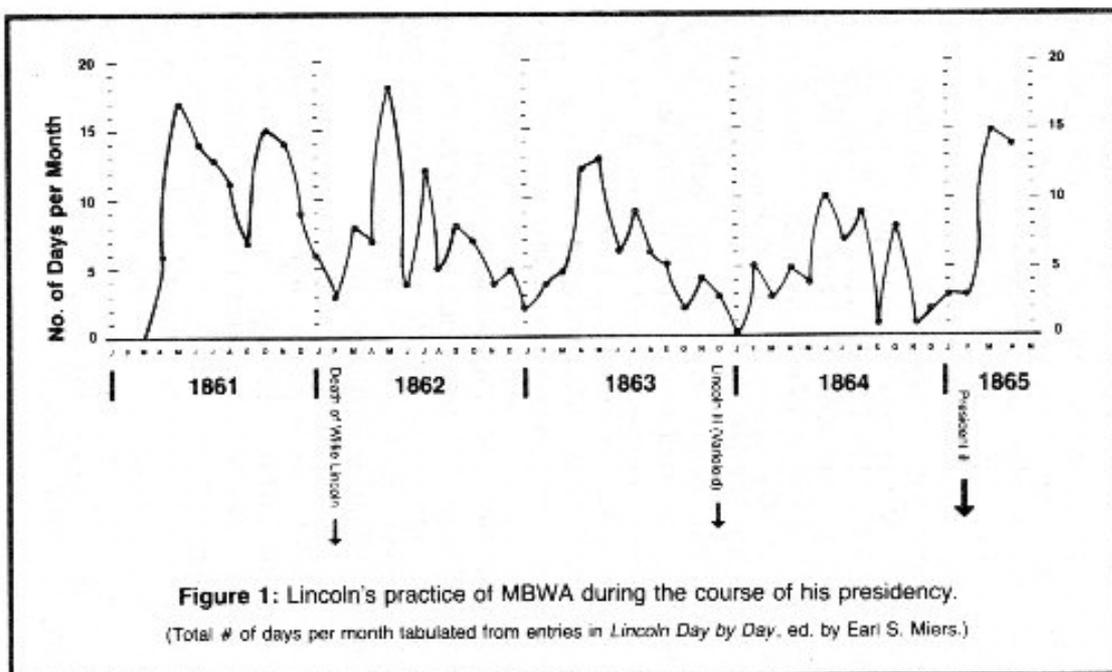
III. Endeavour

- Exercise a Strong Hand – Be Decisive
- Lead by Being Led
- Set Goals and Be Results-Oriented
- Keep Searching Until You Find Your “Grant”
- Encourage Innovation

IV. Communication

- Master the Art of Public Speaking
- Influence People Through Conversation and Storytelling
- Preach Vision and Continually Reaffirm It

To give a flavour of the book – in an early chapter Phillips quotes Lincoln describing Gen. John C. Fremont (Dept of the West) “He is losing the confidence and respect of men near him, whose support any man in his position must have to be successful. His cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself, and allows nobody to see him; and by which he does not know what is going on in the very matter he is dealing with”. With this description, says the author. Lincoln revealed the cornerstone of his own personal leadership philosophy, an approach that would become part of a revolution in modern leadership thinking 100 years later when it was dubbed MBWA (Management by Wandering Around) by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in their 1982 book “In Search of Excellence”. He demonstrates how much Lincoln was in part out of the office with a graph:



As you might expect, the book contains many Lincoln anecdotes and quotations – in fact, as you see above, it advocates one of the “Lincoln principles” to be influencing people by storytelling. The author makes that point that humour and word pictures help to get a point across and adopted by the audience.

The impression I got is of a leader prepared to engage with others to reason out the best course of action.

In the Chapter “Be a Master of Paradox” Phillips starts by quoting seemingly contradictory statements made between March 1861 and July 1862:

Take *time* and think *well* upon a subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time.

Delay is ruining us.

Time is everything. Please act in view of this.

Make haste slowly.

Phillips claims Lincoln was “flexible yet consistent” and says Lincoln’s adept handling of paradox was later confirmed by recent leadership studies as an essential skill for all leaders (referring to Tom Peters book *Thriving on Chaos*). Lincoln says “My policy is to have no policy”.

Another exotic “Lincoln Principle” based on a number of cited cases is: “When you are in deep distress and cannot restrain some expression of it, sit down and write out a harsh letter venting your anger. But don’t send it.” thereby avoiding unnecessary or unproductive conflict. It is well known that a letter was written to Meade after Gettysburg but never sent or signed.

In many case the author claims Lincoln avoided issuing direct orders but lead by implying, hinting and suggesting. Lincoln would give credit where credit was due but conversely would accept responsibility when things went wrong. This habit of giving subordinates the feeling that they were in many ways doing the leading and played to Lincoln’s need for honesty, integrity and human dignity. If nothing else, it is claimed, it made them good at their jobs. It also is claimed to have encouraged innovation and risk taking because they knew that if they failed, Lincoln would not blame them. The President, it is said, readily accepted responsibility for battles lost during the Civil War. “He tried to let his generals know that if they failed he too failed.” (p103)

While reading this book I couldn’t help but be reminded of Bruce Dennett’s paper from our July meeting – where he proposed: “Each generation has created its own Lincoln”. Perhaps Lincoln is a chameleon who takes on whatever theories are popular at the time – in this case the management theories of Tom Peters and others from the 90s.

Bruce McLennan
September 2007

Discussion

- 1) In your understanding, does the definition of leadership imply agreement of those being lead?
- 2) Do you think of Lincoln as sometimes a paradox? Appearing to agree with different points of view or do you feel he usually stood for clear values?
- 3) Is it your impression from what you know about Lincoln that the author is trying to “shoe-horn” Lincoln into 1990s management theories?