Lincoln the Transformational Leader
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by Gordon Leidner of Great American History

The following analyzes Lincoln's leadership skills in light of modern transformational leadership theory. The article is Reprinted Courtesy of the Lincoln Herald, Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum, Lincoln Memorial University. It is from Fall, 2002 issue, pp. 111-118.

Lincoln as a Transformational Leader

BY GORDON LEIDNER

Lincoln's leadership ability has been one of the most discussed qualities of our 16th president. Although many books and articles have been written on the subject of Lincoln as a leader,[1] only a few studies have employed modern leadership theory to analyze and qualify Lincoln's performance.[2] Modern leadership theory is used today by both academicians and corporate America to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of leaders and managers of organizations. By scrutinizing Lincoln's performance in light of leadership theory it is possible to gain additional understanding of his outstanding ability as president.

Leaders have been studied for centuries, but it has been in only the last one-hundred years that the academic world has made a serious effort to develop scientific leadership theories. Initially driven by industrialists' desire to increase productivity in the manufacturing work force, researchers such as F. W. Taylor began efficiency studies in the early twentieth century. It was not long before theorists realized that productivity was a function of the mind as well as physical or organizational factors, and studies concentrated increasingly on how man is psychologically motivated to perform. Dozens of theories and their variations were developed in the twentieth century by management theorists such as F. E. Fiedler, N. Maier, R. Stodgill, R. Likert, K. Maher, B. Bass, and J. M. Burns. Leadership theories with names such as psychoanalytical, contingency, charismatic, attribution, situational, transactional, and transformational were developed as academicians attempted to discover the ingredients of the effective leader.[3]

It was in 1978 that James McGregor Burns, a presidential scholar and leadership theorist, first proposed what would become known as transformational leadership theory.[4] According to Bernard M. Bass, a present-day authority on the subject, transformational leaders transform or motivate followers to go beyond their own self-interests for the good of their group.[5] Transformational leaders motivate followers by making them aware of the importance of accomplishing certain tasks, and by activating their "higher order" needs, which include moral values such as liberty, justice, and equality—as opposed to baser needs such as fear, greed, jealousy, and hatred.[6]

Although there are many variations of transformational leadership theory, most theorists accept Bernard M. Bass's position on what a successful transformational leader does. The extent the leader is considered transformational is measured primarily in terms of his or her effect on followers. Followers usually feel trust, loyalty, and respect toward the leader. They are motivated to do more than they originally expected to, and they continue to persevere and make sacrifices towards the common goal in spite of personal difficulties or severe hardship. Finally, they are inspired to follow higher moral principles as a result of the influence of the transformational leader.
To analyze Lincoln’s transformational leadership ability, we will evaluate his skills in three ways: first, the degree to which he acquired the trust, loyalty, and respect of followers; second, his ability to inspire people to keep making sacrifices in spite of hardships; and third, the effectiveness of his appeal to followers’ ethical values in order to inspire them to a “higher morality.” One of the most convenient groups on which to measure the impact of Lincoln’s leadership skills are the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac. Most of the soldiers recorded their opinions of the president in their letters, and large collections of these letters are still available.

Also, to fully appreciate Lincoln’s skills as a transformational leader, it is important to understand his use of a different kind of skill known as transactional leadership. Transactional leadership theory deals with how people motivate followers by simple “give and take.” It involves the bargaining or trading of one need for another—without any attempt to motivate followers by appealing to their desire to benefit others out of self-sacrifice. The transactional leader offers a tangible reward to followers for accomplishing a desired task—such as a politician’s offer of jobs for the votes of his constituents.

It is essential to understand that Lincoln was a politician as well as a leader, and to be able to recognize how he occasionally used transactional leadership skills to attain desired results. Consequently, we will consider one significant accomplishment of Lincoln’s in light of both transformational and transactional leadership theories.

The transformational leader develops the trust, loyalty, and respect of his followers. In his effort to understand the relationship of Lincoln and the army, author William C. Davis read hundreds of soldiers’ diaries and unpublished papers. In his book *Lincoln’s Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation*, he presents the results of this research. Since most of the soldiers’ letters reviewed were addressed to friends or family members, they provide an excellent source of the men’s opinions of their president.

Davis believes that Lincoln understood the importance of maintaining close contact with the soldiers. Lincoln, who had himself been a volunteer in the Blackhawk War, understood the hearts and minds of the men in the ranks. He sympathized with them, and appreciated the hardships they were going through. He visited the Army of the Potomac frequently, and told the men to come and see him about any problems they couldn’t get resolved through normal channels. Many did just that.

According to Secretary of State William Seward, “There never was a man so accessible to [both] proper and improper persons” as Lincoln.[7] Davis estimates that Lincoln had personal interviews with at least two thousand soldiers during the course of the war, many of which took place in the White House. Lincoln not only met with men in his office, but he also talked to them when visiting the camps, at the Soldiers Home, and when he and Mary went to the hospitals. It was not uncommon to see him walking through a Washington hospital, going from bed to bed and talking to the men. Many convalescing soldiers were impressed with Lincoln’s genuine concern about their wounds.

Lincoln always treated the men, regardless of rank, with courtesy and respect. When Lincoln received soldiers in the White House, he listened patiently to every request and attempted to solve their problem, no matter how insignificant it was. After listening to their petition, he would frequently write a simple statement such as “I want
this soldier boy to have a chance" and send the note to the Secretary of War or other department head. The men came to regard him as “Father Abraham,” and became confident he would do his best to take care of them.[8]

Lincoln genuinely enjoyed his visits with the Army of the Potomac. Many men wrote of the comic appearance of the lanky Commander-in-Chief—riding past them on a horse that appeared too small for him, with coat tails flying and his tall hat nearly falling off—but in nearly every account is a tone of genuine love and affection for him. “We all felt proud to know that we had been permitted to see and salute him,” one soldier wrote.[9]

Many of the soldiers “carried small photos of their president with them in their knapsacks,”[10] and ultimately Lincoln attained an even greater devotion from the men than George B. McClellan—who was by far the most popular general from the Army of the Potomac. When Lincoln replaced his troublesome army commander in November of 1862, most soldiers blamed everyone except their Commander-in-Chief.[11]

According to Davis, Lincoln’s “common touch” and “absolute absence of affectation” won the affection and loyalty of the men.[12] The men developed affectionate nicknames for him, such as Old Abe, Father Abraham, Honest Abe, Uncle Abe, or just Abraham. They became convinced that Lincoln had their best interest at heart, and when supplies ran low or the mail was slow in coming, would blame Stanton or their generals rather than their president.

The troops became concerned when they realized that the war was wearing Lincoln down, and saw in his saddened countenance something that “bond them to him.”[13] When Lincoln visited the troops in early 1863, hundreds of accounts of the men talk about his “careworn” expression. They frequently talked of the tremendous burden he suffered and expressed their concern for his health and ability to endure the hardships he was facing. After one visit, two thirds of the soldiers’ letters home mention the “sad look” on the president’s face. “He looks care worn,” wrote a Chaplain from Pennsylvania. “His labors must be arduous. He certainly is sinking under the load of care . . I could not help uttering the prayer God bless Abraham Lincoln.”[14]

Lincoln’s sad look and concerns were genuine, and the men knew it. A New York soldier, Private Rice Bull, wrote that “the men could not be restrained from so honoring [cheering] him . . . he really was the ideal of the Army.”[15]

Having witnessed the sad expression on Lincoln’s face as he passed by, Surgeon Daniel M. Hold wrote of Lincoln: “Poor man, I pity him, and almost wonder at his being alive . . . the gigantic work upon his hands, and the task upon his physical frame must be very great.”[16]

One New England soldier saw tears in the eyes of the president as he rode by. “Why he wept I know not . . . But this I know: under that homely exterior is a tender a heart as ever throbbed, one that is easily moved toward the side of the poor and downtrodden.” A Pennsylvania soldier wrote “Well to day we were reviewed by Father Abraham . . . This is the first time ever I saw Uncle Abe to have a fare sight of him. He looked very care
Davis writes: “I]n seeing Lincoln so visibly carrying the weight of responsibility for the war, the soldiers saw that in his way he suffered as they did, and though he did not face death in battle or disease and discomfort in the camps, still that landscape of care in his face let them know that he, too, was a casualty. It bound them to him in a way they never experienced with any commander of their army.”[18]

Lincoln truly developed the trust, loyalty, and respect of the troops. When it came time for his re-election in the Fall of 1864, he received an overwhelming share of the soldier vote—approximately 80 percent.[19]

Was Lincoln successful in the second transformational leadership quality—inspiring followers to continuously make personal sacrifices for the benefit of society? While many consider it remarkable that the Southern armies maintained the struggle for four long years—in spite of increasing material odds against them—historian James M. McPherson believes that the Confederate soldiers had a tremendous motivational advantage over their counterparts in the North. He believes the fact that they considered themselves fighting “for their homes” and “independence” was a significant encouragement to them.[20]

Lincoln’s challenge was to continuously motivate northern soldiers to fight for something much less easily appreciated than the southern soldiers’ “defense of their homes.” As the casualties mounted, and the war dragged inexorably on, the cause of “maintaining the Union” became increasingly chimerical to many men.

With this problem in mind, Lincoln was very careful to remind the soldiers how important their sacrifices were for the country. The following, spoken to the 166th Ohio Regiment, is evidently typical of what he said countless times during the course of the war:

“I almost always feel inclined, when I happen to say anything to soldiers, to impress upon them in a few brief remarks the importance of success in this contest. It is not merely for to-day, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.”[21]

In a similar motivational speech, Lincoln said the following to the 148th Ohio Regiment:

“[T]his government must be preserved in spite of the acts of any man or set of men. It is worthy your every
effort. Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest amongst us are held out the highest privileges and positions. The present moment finds me at the White House, yet there is as good a chance for your children as there was for my father’s.

Again I admonish you not to be turned from your stern purpose of defending your beloved country and its free institutions by any arguments urged by ambitious and designing men, but stand fast to the Union and the old flag.”[22]

In a speech to the twelfth Indiana Regiment, Lincoln turned the cheering men’s attention away from himself and towards their own accomplishments by saying, “... I assure you that the nation is more indebted to you, and such as you, than to me. It is upon the brave hearts and strong arms of the people of the country that our reliance has been placed in support of free government and free institutions.”[23]

William C. Davis says that Lincoln understood what motivated men to continue the struggle. He said Lincoln knew “It took victories... it took support from home, pride in their regiments and their army, and a source of inspiration. They could get that last from some of their commanders, yet by now [two years into the war] Lincoln seemed to understand that they got it from him, too.”[24]

Lincoln’s success at motivating the troops is manifest in many of the men’s letters, including a Pennsylvania soldier who wrote home to his mother, telling her that although his enlistment was about to expire, he would not be coming home. “I have made up my mind that a country that is worth living in time of peace is worth fighting for in time of war so I am yet willing to put up with the hardships of a soldiers life.”[25]

So, in spite of the fact that to “save the Union” was a more vague cause than to “defend home,” The Army of the Potomac kept going--across the murderous fields of Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania Court House, and Cold Harbor. Considering the fact that the men never gave up, and at the end of the war the Union armies were larger and more powerful than they were in the early months of the war, a strong case can be made for Lincoln’s ability to inspire continuous sacrifice among followers.

Making an effective appeal to the followers’ moral principles is essential to the transformational leader, and according to James McPherson, in his book For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, “Convictions of duty, honor, patriotism and ideology functioned as the principal sustaining motivators of Civil War soldiers.”[26]

An example of the way Lincoln appealed to ideology is illustrated with how he dealt with the moral issue of slavery. At the war’s inception, the elimination of slavery was low on the agenda for most men in the army. According to McPherson, in the first eighteen months of the war only about 3 out of 10 soldiers who wrote home believed that “the abolition of slavery was inseparably linked to the goal of preserving the Union.”[27] Consequently, at the beginning of the war, Lincoln knew it was best to leave slavery alone.

Union Major Generals John C. Fremont in Missouri and David Hunter in South Carolina had attempted to
declare slaves free within their jurisdictions before Lincoln thought the northern people were ready for such a move. He countermanded their actions, explaining that it was essential they not alienate the border states. Lincoln's eye was also on the armies, knowing that few soldiers wanted to risk their lives for the sake of freeing the slaves early in the war.

“If anyone thinks this army is fighting to free the Negro . . . they are terribly mistaken,” wrote a northern soldier of the Irish Brigade. According to Davis, this was typical of what the soldiers thought before Lincoln introduced the Emancipation Proclamation. But Lincoln was anxious to strike a blow at slavery. He believed that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong,” and in the summer of 1862 he recognized an opportunity to exercise his presidential authority to strike at the “peculiar institution.”

On July 13, 1862, Lincoln surprised Seward and Welles with the announcement that he was thinking about freeing the slaves. On July 22 he formally announced this plan at a cabinet meeting. Seward convinced his chief to wait until the Army of the Potomac achieved a military victory before making the announcement public, and while Lincoln waited, he watched for an opportunity to prepare the public for what he knew would be a bombshell.

An editorial written by Horace Greeley, entitled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” provided a golden opportunity for Lincoln to do exactly this. In his editorial Greeley had said that many of Lincoln’s supporters were “sorely disappointed and deeply pained by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of rebels. . . . We think you are strangely and disastrously remiss in the discharge of your official and imperative duty with regard to the emancipating provisions of the new Confiscation Act.”

Lincoln's August 22 response to Greeley was printed in the New York Tribune a few days after the original editorial. At face value, it was little more than a defense of why he hadn’t yet freed the slaves. But in fact Lincoln had something much more important in mind. In his response he said:

“I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be `the Union as it was.` If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men every where could be free.”
This statement is an example of transactional leadership at its finest. In this response he makes it plain that he will free the slaves only if it is beneficial to saving the Union. By linking the controversial act of freeing the slaves with the incontrovertible act of saving the Union, Lincoln was preparing the people in the event emancipation became necessary. He led everyone to believe he hadn’t made up his mind yet, but he planned to do what he thought best for the purpose of saving the Union—whether that was leaving the slaves in bondage, freeing all of them, or freeing some and leaving others alone.

This was the transactional argument: “If I free the slaves, we will save the Union.” With this argument Lincoln hoped to divert some of the criticism that would be directed his way by people that were against emancipation and soldiers that still held the position that they hadn’t “gone to war to free the slaves.”

Shortly after the Battle of Antietam, on September 22, 1862, Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. His transactional argument seemed to have the desired effect. Many soldiers wrote letters exclaiming the wisdom of ending slavery. One soldier from the 8th Pennsylvania said, “Lincoln’s motto appears to be ‘Save the Union. If slavery aids the rebellion it will have to go by the board, but the Union must be preserved.’”[32] Another said “Emancipation is becoming popular throughout the whole Union everybody knows that slavery was the cause of this war and slavery stands in the way of putting down this rebellion and now let us put it out of the way.”[33]

Yet Lincoln did not rely on the purely transactional argument to win everyone over to the cause of eliminating slavery. By far his most eloquent arguments were transformational ones—based on the immorality and injustice of slavery. Some of his most memorable speeches deal with the virtue of ending slavery and propagating freedom. For example:

“In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free - honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.” [34]

At Gettysburg he spoke transforming words about the “new birth” of freedom:

“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’s appeal to the moral argument for ending slavery had a significant impact on the soldiers. Some men still disapproved of freeing the slaves, but according to Davis, for every expression of disapproval for the
Emancipation Proclamation “there were ten in support of the act.”[35]

One Minnesota soldier wrote: “I now feel that we are upon the right road at last.”[36] Another said, “the God of battle will be with us . . . now that we are fighting for Liberty and Union and not Union and Slavery.” A Private from New York wrote, “Thank God, the contest is now between Slavery and freedom and every honest man knows what he is fighting for.”[37]

A soldier in the 59th Illinois wrote, “it is astonishing how things has changed in reference to freeing the Negros . . . It allways has been plane to me that this race must be freed befor god would recognise us . . We bost of liberty and we should try to impart it to others . . . now I belive we are on gods side . . now I can fight with a good heart.”[38]

In March, 1863 a Minnesota soldier wrote: “I have never been in favor of the abolition of slavery until since this war has ditermined me in the conviction that it is a greater sin than our Govt is able to stand—and now I go in for a war of emancipation and I am ready and willing to do my share of the work.”[39]

Through investigation of Lincoln’s relationship with the troops, we find evidence that Lincoln possessed the skills of a transformational leader. He developed the trust, loyalty, and affection of the soldiers by making himself available to them, showing genuine concern for their difficulties, and putting forth a visible effort to resolve the problems they faced. In his “careworn” expression they saw a compassionate father, not a slick lawyer or wily politician. One soldier spoke volumes about his trust and affection for Lincoln when he wrote home, “If he says all Slaves are hereafter Forever Free—Amen. And on the other hand if he says not one Slave shall be Freed. Amen.”[40]

Lincoln also clearly inspired the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac to persevere in spite of hardships and a succession of military defeats. [41] He did this by convincing the men that the sacrifices they were making were extremely important for both their children and their children’s children. We have today only a few remaining examples of what Lincoln said in his speeches to the troops, but those we do have are typical of what must have been dozens, if not hundreds, of motivational talks that Lincoln gave to soldiers throughout the war. He gave these everywhere he had an opportunity to speak to the men—at hospitals, on the White House lawn, and while visiting the men in camp. William T. Sherman tells of an incident early in the war when Lincoln was visiting the troops. Sherman said that Lincoln “gave one of the neatest, best, and most feeling addresses I ever listened to.”[42] What exactly Lincoln said in that speech Sherman didn’t say, but it made a lasting impression on him.

Finally, it was in his ability to appeal to the moral values of his followers that Lincoln has gained one of his greatest legacies. Lincoln successfully transformed the war from one that had the singular purpose of preserving the Union to one that had a dual purpose—by adding the elimination of slavery. He did this by using several leadership skills, including the two reviewed here—transactional and transformational.
Whether Lincoln used transformational leadership more than any other, or made even more effective use of other skills such as charismatic leadership is something that deserves further study. Suffice it to say for now that Lincoln was a strong transformational leader that not only developed loyalty and willingness for self-sacrifice among the soldiers, but also appealed to their higher moral values—as evidenced by changing their attitudes toward emancipation of the slaves. His leadership provided the nation, and the world, “a new birth of freedom.”

END NOTES:


[7] Grant & Reid, p. 75


[18] Davis, *Lincoln’s Men,* 144


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Transformational leadership may be stated. “Transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate followers’ interests and stir followers to look beyond their own interests to the good of others.”

1. Transformational leadership refers to the set of abilities that allow the leader to recognize the need for change, to create a vision to guide that change and to execute the change effectively.

2. Qualities as a person and leader As a leader Lincoln’s qualities also included the following: He was a great orator and had qualities to impress not only his followers but also persuade his opponents. His famous speeches included House Divided Speech, Cooper Union Address, The First Inaugural Address, The Second Inaugural Address and Gettysburg Address.

About the author: Gordon Leidner received his MGA in Applied Management from the University of Maryland University College. He is a PMI-certified Program Management Professional (PMP).