

Abraham Lincoln and the Art of Collaborative Leadership

by Russ Linden

When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, he changed the course of the Civil War and transformed the lives of millions of enslaved blacks. Looking back through the lens of the 21st century, we can easily appreciate the profound consequences of this one act. But history is lived forward, not backward, and in early 1862, many of Lincoln's most ardent supporters worried that he might never make this fundamental break with the past.

Why did Lincoln hesitate, and how did he ultimately prepare the country for this enormous step forward? His ability to lead in a collaborative manner helped him to steer the country through a difficult and challenging time.

Building Support for the Emancipation Proclamation

Lincoln had long been opposed to slavery on moral grounds, but as president he moved slowly. He wondered about his legal authority to outlaw slavery. He worried that emancipation might fracture his fragile coalition of pro- and anti-slavery states.

Elected with less than 40 percent of the vote, he was extraordinarily attuned to the mood of the people. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin noted, "As a politician, he had an intuitive sense of when to hold fast, when to wait, and when to lead."

Lincoln knew in early 1862 that Northerners were bitterly split on the question of slavery.

Given these complexities, how did Lincoln become the "Great Emancipator?"

- During winter and spring of 1862, he discussed his thoughts on slavery in meetings with important guests, suggesting a path to gradual emancipation and offering to reimburse states that abolished slavery.
- He brought this message to pro-slavery congressmen from loyal border states. He argued that Confederate

leaders would soon lose their appetite for war if they saw the pro-slavery Union states free their slaves. The congressmen weren't persuaded, but they realized that Lincoln was serious about emancipation.

- Lincoln learned from Constitutional experts, some of whom said that the president had the power to emancipate slaves if it was done under his war powers to end the conflict.
- In July 1862, he met again with loyal slave state representatives, repeating his plan for gradual emancipation and adding a new argument: emancipation was inevitable. The Union's ultimate victory guaranteed that slavery would soon end. If the border states outlawed slavery now, they would be rewarded with money, and a shorter war.
- On July 22, he read an early draft of the proclamation to his cabinet. He listened carefully to their reactions (the group was sharply divided). Secretary of State William H. Seward, pointing to the Union's recent military losses, worried that issuing the proclamation now would look like the act of a weak and desperate government. He urged Lincoln to wait for a major military victory. Lincoln decided to hold the proclamation until his armies produced such a victory.
- That victory occurred at Antietam Creek on September 17, 1862—the bloodiest day in American history. Despite the horrific bloodshed, the Union pushed Robert E. Lee's army out of Maryland, and Union supporters cheered.
- Five days later Lincoln met with his cabinet and read a revised draft of the proclamation. He now emphasized the military rationale for freeing those slaves in rebel-held areas. He again asked how to improve the draft, and accepted changes that strengthened the wording. Lincoln published the preliminary proclamation the next day, to take effect January 1, 1863.

Public reaction was immediate and all over the map. Most abolitionists were delighted, those opposed to emancipation were outraged, and many others worried that this would demoralize the Union army.

Lincoln knew there was no going back, nor did he wish to. But he had to keep educating the people, subtly moving public support in his favor. In his annual message to Congress in December 1862, he argued that the country's geography was perfectly suited to be one nation, but would never work for two or more nations. Thus, the Union must be maintained and the war won.

He also described a future American society that was multiracial. This was a turning point for Lincoln, who previously had suggested the deportation of freed slaves. He closed with words that have resonated throughout history: "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."

Push involves using the authority of one's position. Pull, which is more indirect, requires tapping others' values, goals, or interests to move in a common direction.

Characteristics of Collaborative Leaders

Lincoln's approach to emancipation reflects five key characteristics that I have seen in many effective collaborative leaders. These leaders

1. are driven to achieve the goal, but keep their egos in check
2. listen carefully to understand others' perspectives
3. seek win-win solutions
4. use "pull" more than "push"
5. think strategically and connect the project to a larger purpose.

Achieve the Goal, Keep Egos in Check

According to two of Lincoln's closest aides, he frequently preached that "I am in favor of short statutes of limitations in politics," meaning that he held no grudges. He



The first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before the cabinet. Painted by Francis Bicknell Carpenter; engraved by Alexander Hay Ritchie. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-02502.

kept his eye firmly on the prize, and that meant winning the war and maintaining the Union. Once he determined that emancipation was critical to winning the war, he was single minded in focusing on the proclamation.

His passion was for this lofty goal, not to promote himself. Indeed, he often diffused criticisms with humor. When a critic called him two faced, he replied, "if I had a second face, does anyone think I would choose this one?"

Listen Carefully to Understand Others' Perspectives

Lincoln biographer David Von Drehle wrote that Lincoln was "often able to understand others better than they understood themselves. ... He had an unusual ability to look at things through the eyes of his critics as well as his friends." He used this talent with his fractious cabinet, especially on the timing and wording of the proclamation.

Seek Win-Win Solutions

It was because of his ability to understand others' needs that Lincoln always looked for win-win options. He urged the loyal border states to free their slaves by pointing out the benefits to their people. In a message to Congress, he emphasized the importance of maintaining the war effort by noting that Northerners would be safer in a united country than they would if the South became a separate nation, with the inevitable tensions and violence that would result.

Use Pull More Than Push

Push involves using the authority of one's position. Pull, which is more indirect, requires tapping others' values, goals, or interests to move in a common direction. Thus, when Lincoln talked with fervent pro-slavery Northerners, he argued that ending slavery would ensure something that they both prayed for: preservation of the Union.

When it came to the proclamation, Lincoln twice asked his cabinet for their advice, listening to their objections and incorporating some of their suggestions into the final draft. His respect for their desire to be part of his team was an excellent example of pull.

Think Strategically and Connect the Project to a Larger Purpose

Lincoln spent countless hours meeting with office seekers and personally filled more than 1,200 government positions. His reason? To populate the government and the army officer corps with people from all factions, to connect them to his fragile coalition.

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He also framed emancipation as a strategic move to help the war effort. As Northerners slowly warmed to the idea, Lincoln began talking about emancipation in moral terms as well.

Abraham Lincoln was an extraordinary leader during our nation's most perilous time. His ability to lead in a collaborative manner was one of his many strengths. We can all learn from his example.

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