

People Mastery—

It Worked for President Lincoln—Can It Work for You?

by Marta Wilson, PhD

A number of masterful leaders have emerged throughout U. S. history. While several like Franklin, Webster, and King made a dramatic impact on mankind without reaching the White House, others, such as Washington, Jefferson, and the Roosevelts, became presidents. One, born almost 200 years ago, still inspires and moves people from all walks of life. That person is President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was born in February of 1809 and died in April of 1865.^{1 2 3} During his 56 years, Lincoln worked miracles through people. He communicated effectively, built instrumental bonds, and wielded remarkable influence.

Lincoln had people mastery. In other words, he created, valued, and nurtured relationships. When you think about it, all of our institutions are relationship-based: the best friend, the organization, the government, the business, the sports team, the marriage. But, effective, life-affirming relationships do not just happen. They must be initiated, sparked, nurtured, managed, created, and recreated. Some people are perhaps born relationship builders. Most of us, though, have to work pretty hard at it. However, whether by birth and inclination or by sheer will and perseverance, anyone can become masterful at building relationships, just as Lincoln did.

People mastery is the ability to create purposeful, meaningful relationships.⁴ It includes awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. People mastery also involves adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others. Daniel Goleman, author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, calls it “social competence”, which has been proven to predict who will excel in any organization. People mastery includes three things that Lincoln continuously demonstrated: communication, building bonds, and influencing others.⁵

Lincoln Communicated

Lincoln was an adept communicator. This is the keystone of all social skills. Among managers, communication competence strongly distinguishes stars from average or poor performers. Good communicators are effective in give-and-take. They rely on their sense of others' emotions to fine-tune their messages. They deal with difficult issues straightforwardly. They listen well, seeking mutual understanding. Adept communicators foster open dialogues and work to stay receptive to bad news as well as good.

Lincoln sought information by wandering. As a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, he spent a great deal of time

away from home seeking information for his cases. He was the kind of lawyer who would go out and see firsthand what was happening. This was a major factor in Lincoln's professional success and how he gained vital information to make effective decisions. This cornerstone of Lincoln's philosophy became part of a revolution in modern leadership thinking when it was dubbed *Managing by Wandering Around (MBWA)* in the book *In Search of Excellence* (1982). MBWA is the process of stepping out, interacting with people, and establishing human contact. It creates a sense of commitment, collaboration, and community.

Lincoln was accessible. He was probably the most accessible chief executive the United States has ever known. When he was president, his secretaries reported that he spent 75 percent of his time meeting with people. No matter how busy he was, he always seemed to find time for those who called on him. Often his secretaries would tell a visitor that the president was busy and that they should come back later. Then, Lincoln would open his office door and welcome the visitor anyway. Lincoln believed that if people had easy access to him, they would view him in a more positive, trustworthy light.

Lincoln was informal. He preferred to interact with people when they were in a less pressure-packed environment. For Lincoln, casual contact was as important as formal gatherings, if not more so. He believed it allowed people to be more relaxed and open with their thoughts and feelings, and it created the right foundation for building bonds. Creating an atmosphere of openness is not a trivial gesture. The biggest single complaint of American workers is poor communication with their co-workers; two thirds say it prevents them from doing their best work.

Lincoln listened. Effective listening is crucial to communicating. Listening skills—asking astute questions, being open-minded, seeking to understand, not interrupting, asking for suggestions—account for a third of people's evaluations of whether someone they work with is an effective communicator. Understandably, listening is among the most frequently taught business skills.

Lincoln was “cool.” He was poised and confident under pressure. A study of middle- and upper-level managers found that those rated best as communicators shared the ability to adopt a calm, composed, and patient manner, no matter what emotional state they were in. They were able to put aside the imperatives of their own feelings, even when

turbulent, in order to make themselves fully available for others. As a result, these managers were able to take the time needed to gather essential information and find a way to be helpful, including giving constructive feedback. Instead of being dismissive or attacking, they tended to be specific about what went right, what went wrong, and how to move forward. They exercised emotional control and kept cool so as to stay open to what they were hearing and fine-tune their responses.

“Keeping cool” helps us to put preoccupations aside for the time being, staying flexible in our own emotional responses. This trait is admired worldwide, even in cultures that prefer agitation to calmness in certain situations. People who can remain collected in an emergency or in the face of someone else’s panic or distress have a reassuring sense of self-control, enter smoothly into conversations, and stay effectively involved. Staying cool, calm, and collected makes it easier to build bonds.

Lincoln Built Bonds

Lincoln got to know people. Getting to know each other can overcome mountains of personal differences and hard feelings. Alliances create power. So goes the wisdom of Lincoln’s famous statement: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” These words have lived on through the years, continually regarded as one of Lincoln’s most important messages. In creating alliances, Lincoln took the time to find out how people would respond in any given situation. He also ensured people knew the same about him. If others knew what he would do, he found they could make their own decisions without asking him for direction, thereby avoiding delay and inactivity.

Lincoln created connections. People who are competent at building bonds cultivate and maintain extensive informal networks. They seek out relationships that are mutually beneficial, build rapport, and keep others in the loop. They also develop personal friendships among their work associates. This talent for connecting epitomizes stars in almost every kind of job. Studies of outstanding performers in fields like engineering, computer science, biotechnology, and other “knowledge work” fields find that building and maintaining personal networks is crucial for success.

Lincoln consciously constructed his networks. Top performers do not create random networks. Instead, they are carefully chosen, with each person being included because of a particular expertise or excellence. These networks send information back and forth in an artful, ongoing give-and-take. Each member of a network represents an immediately available extension of knowledge, accessible with a single phone call. What cements these connections is not physical proximity (though it helps) so much as psychological proximity.

Lincoln gave of himself. Unlike Lincoln, many people are too protective of their own work time and agendas, turning down requests to help or to work cooperatively. The result is often resentment and a stunted network. On the other hand, people who can’t say “no” are in danger of taking on so much that their own work suffers. Outstanding performers are able to balance their own critical work with carefully chosen favors, building accounts of good will with people who may become crucial resources down the line.

Lincoln was trustworthy. He gained the trust and respect of people on both personal and professional levels. And trust is the essential building block for successful relationships. Lincoln found that when he openly discussed the mutual level of trust he had with a person, the relationship became more honest and productive. Trust enhanced the effectiveness of his communication and his ability to create a strong network. One of the virtues of building networks is the reservoir of good will and trust that arises. This is particularly crucial for advancement from the lower rungs of an organization to the higher levels. These human links are the routes through which people come to be known for their abilities.

Lincoln leveraged his networks. People who use their networks have an immense time advantage over those who have to use broader, more general sources of information to find answers. One estimate indicates that for every hour a star puts into seeking answers through a network, an average person spends three to five hours gathering the same information. A network of contacts is a kind of personal capital. People who build strong networks usually find it easy to influence others.

Lincoln Influenced Others

Lincoln was persuasive. He influenced people with his friendly manner, openness, and verbal skills. The art of persuasion brought him much success. In 1836, at the age of twenty-seven and during his second term in the Illinois legislature, Lincoln created the plan that moved the capital of the state from Vandalia to Springfield. His clever bargaining, coupled with persistence and persuasiveness, allowed him to pull off what was then regarded as a political coup.

Lincoln built rapport. Lincoln’s remarks to the Springfield Washington Temperance Society in 1842 were clear regarding his thoughts on building rapport and influence. “When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and a true maxim, that a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall.”

Lincoln made suggestions. He gained commitment from individuals through openness, empowerment, and coaching. And, he knew the value of making requests as opposed to issuing orders. His letters and telegrams are filled with suggestions, views, and recommendations. Rarely was there a direct order. He preferred to let people make their own decisions and believed that, through his suggestions, they would do the right thing. Some examples include the following:

- *To General Halleck (9-19-1863):* “I hope you will consider it...”
- *To General Burnside (9-27-1863):* “It was suggested to you, not ordered...”
- *To General Grant (4-30-1864):* “If there is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it.”

Lincoln made time for people. Taking time to establish a bond is not a detour but an essential step in influencing others. In a study of strategic decisions at 356 American companies, more than half were never adopted, were implemented only partially, or were abandoned at the outset. The single most common reason for the failure of these plans was that the lead executives tried to impose their ideas instead of building a supporting consensus. When ideas were dictated, the result was failure 58 percent of the time. But when executives first conferred with colleagues to rethink their long-term priorities, strategic plans were adopted 96 percent of the time.

Lincoln paid attention to subtle cues. Being aware of the intentions and emotions of others is crucial for wielding influence. It is difficult to have a positive impact on others without first sensing how they feel and understanding their position. People who are poor at reading emotional cues and inept at social interactions are very poor at influence. People who are good at influence are skilled at winning people over. They fine-tune presentations to appeal to the listener. They also orchestrate dramatic events to make a point that will resonate with their particular audience. People adept at influence sense or even anticipate their audience’s reaction to their message.

Lincoln responded real-time to feedback. He noticed and responded when logical arguments were falling flat and when appeals that were more emotional would add impact. Real-time response strategies used by top performers include impression management, appeals to reason and facts, and well-placed dramatic actions. This emotional competence emerges over and over as a hallmark of superior performers, particularly among supervisors, managers, and executives. At every level, though, nimble responses to the people in one’s environment are crucial.

SUMMARY— Lincoln’s Life Lessons

COMMUNICATE: Listen Openly and Send Convincing Messages

- Listen well
- Be accessible
- Seek mutual understanding
- Keep cool but do not freeze
- Seek information by “wandering around”
- Deal with difficult issues straightforwardly
- Stay receptive to bad news as well as good
- Register emotional cues to help fine-tune your message

BUILD BONDS: Nurture Instrumental Relationships

- Give of yourself
- Get to know people
- Create and cultivate connections
- Build rapport and keep others in the loop
- Seek out relationships that are mutually beneficial
- Make and maintain friendships among work associates
- Consciously construct networks that extend your knowledge

INFLUENCE OTHERS: Wield Effective Tactics for Persuasion

- Make time for people
- Pay attention to subtle cues
- Be persuasive, friendly, open, and fluent
- Make suggestions and avoid giving orders
- Build rapport with others...“a drop of honey is worth...”
- Fine-tune your presentations to appeal to your listener
- Orchestrate dramatic events to effectively make a point

Tools You Can Use

On pages 4 and 5 you will find two tools that can help you assess your level of people mastery. These tools are Ques-

tions and Reflections on People Mastery (page 5) and the People Mastery Profile (page 6). The purpose of both tools is to heighten your consciousness about areas that you might want to improve. After conducting a self-assessment using these instruments, we urge you to seize all opportunities that come your way to learn, grow, and expand your tremendous potential.

REFERENCES

- 1 Phillips, D. (1992). *Lincoln on Leadership*. Warner Books.
- 2 Kunhardt, P. et al (1992). *Lincoln An Illustrated Biography*. Random House.
- 3 Donald, D. (1996). *Lincoln*. Simon and Schuster.
- 4 Hacker, S. & Wilson, M. (1999). *Work Miracles*. Insight Press.
- 5 Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books.

QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON PEOPLE MASTERY

The following items are designed to heighten consciousness about your people mastery potential.

- What is my ability to understand other people's actions and motives?
- What barriers keep me from looking inside other people?
- How do I typically manage agreements and breakdowns?
- Where is my opportunity for improvement in managing agreements and breakdowns?
- How much feedback do I normally seek? How much am I willing to accept?
- Do I know to what level my coworkers trust me?
- What is my intention to build and nurture trust with my coworkers?
- Do I lead by example when it comes to managing relationships? If so, how? In not, why?
- How do I usually cope with conflict?
- In what ways can my conflict resolution approach improve?
- Do I lead by example when it comes to managing conflict? If so, how? In not, why?
- In what ways are my relationship management skills lacking?
- How well do I sense others' feelings and perspectives and take active interest in their concerns?
- What is my ability to sense others' development needs and bolster their abilities?
- How effectively do I anticipate, recognize and meet my customers' needs?
- How well do I cultivate opportunities through diverse kinds of people?
- How well can I read a group's emotional currents?
- How effective are my tactics for persuasion?
- Do I listen openly and send convincing messages?
- Am I good at negotiating and resolving disagreements?
- Is it easy for me to initiate change?
- How well do I nurture instrumental relationships?
- How productively do I work with others toward shared goals?
- How easily do I create group synergy in pursuing collective goals?

PEOPLE MASTERY PROFILE

On a scale of 0-10, with 10 being superior and 0 being extremely challenged, please score yourself on each of the following people mastery qualities.

- ___ my ability to build relationships
- ___ my understanding of others
- ___ my ability to initiate change
- ___ my service orientation

- ___ my ability to leverage diversity
- ___ my political awareness
- ___ my ability to develop people
- ___ my influence over others
- ___ my ability to manage conflict
- ___ my communication skills
- ___ my ability to motivate a team
- ___ my collaboration and cooperation skills

In order to calculate your People Mastery Score, add together your scores on the above items.

My People Mastery Score _____

108 – 120	Superior
96 – 107	Excellent
84 – 95	Good
72 – 83	Fair
71 – below	Challenged

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Marta Wilson is chief executive officer of Transformation Systems Incorporated (www.transformationsystems.com). Marta promotes integration of self, people, and enterprise mastery around the world. In her work, she plays many roles including coach, facilitator, speaker, and trainer. Marta's books include *Work Miracles: Transform Yourself and Your Organization*; *Balanced Leadership: Stretch for Self, People, and Enterprise Mastery*; and *Live a Difference*. Her credentials include a Ph.D. in organizational psychology from Virginia Tech, a graduate internship in human resources research with BellSouth Corporation, and a post-doctoral apprenticeship in industrial engineering with Dr. D. Scott Sink, president, World Confederation of Productivity Science.

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