

Leaders are Visionaries – Lessons from Lincoln

(Richard H. Ryder, 2017)

In January I contrasted management with leadership, quoting Admiral Grace Hopper when she said “*managers manage things; leaders lead people*”. Things don’t have emotions, dreams, thoughts of failure, joys of success, or egos. But people do, and thus the challenge. How do you get a person, with his or own idea of what should or should not be done in a given situation, to follow, sometimes blindly and without fear? Well, my February article discussed respect, and that has a great deal to do with getting people to trust you. Respect alone will not get someone to subordinate their ideas to yours; but vision will. A clearly thought out vision, simply and well-articulated, convincingly and persuasively presented will win others to your cause. This is true if you are a U.S. President, a war time general, a little league coach, or a parent. And yes, it’s true if you are Master of your lodge. Vision is such an important success factor for the effective leader that I will periodically present articles on this topic. For now, let’s begin with how Abraham Lincoln viewed vision (pun intended).

While attending elementary school we all learned about our 16th U.S. President. A larger than life figure, literally and figuratively, Lincoln led a country at war for all but a few days of his presidency. The American Civil War was the first real test of the permanency of our great experiment, American Democracy. Other countries were waiting in the wings to take full advantage of the outcome. The north and south were not only split geographically, but economically and socially. The rights of the federal government were pitted against the rights of the states. The industrial north possessed far more resources than the agrarian south, yet that did not prevent 11 states from seceding from the Union.

In the early days of the war Lincoln was politically content with letting slavery persist in the states where it then existed. The abolition of slavery was not the main reason northerners fought in the war, but by 1863 Lincoln realized that the abolition of slavery was morally paramount. Antietam (Sharpsburg) provided Lincoln the military victory he needed to convince northerners that they were fighting a just cause, that of emancipation. Without Antietam (September, 1862) Lincoln did not have the political capital to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

So how did Abraham Lincoln persevere and bring the War Between the States to a hard fought conclusion? I would argue it was his vision.

In his book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, Donald T. Phillips tells the reader that “His message was simple and clear, emphasizing equality and freedom...a *‘fair chance for all’*, and elevation of the *‘condition of men’*. This was the people’s birthright, he maintained, and it should be protected and preserved for future generations”. Phillips goes on to state that in addition to the simplicity and clarity of his vision, Lincoln took every opportunity to promote it, during speeches, writings, and in conversation. Lincoln preached a vision and continually reaffirmed it.

Phillips goes on to say that “Effective visions and organizational mission statements can’t be forced upon the masses. Rather, they must be set in motion by means of persuasion.” As I mentioned in my first

Leadership Series article, in a volunteer organization like Freemasonry persuasion is a more powerful tool than coercion. Phillips continues by stating “The people must accept and implement them [visions] wholeheartedly and without reservation. When this is achieved, it is always done with enthusiasm, commitment, and pride.”

Throughout the war, Lincoln kept repeating and renewing his message, best epitomized in his clear, simply stated, and brief 1863 Gettysburg Address. Phillips tells us the address begins by describing the past (“Four score and seven years ago...”), then describes the present (“Now we are engaged...”), and moves to the renewal stage (“But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate...”). Finally, Lincoln ends with the future and a summary of his vision (“and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”). Phillips concludes by stating that Lincoln realized every leader must understand that “the process of renewal releases the critical human talent and energy that is necessary to ensure success”.

So how do we apply Lincoln’s visioning skill to our leadership roles in Freemasonry?

First, whether you are a Lodge Master, committee chair, event chair, or hold any other leadership position, develop a simply stated vision statement. It can be as simple as “*Create a lodge environment that makes members want to attend and be active*”. This will serve as a clear and constant reminder to you and others exactly what it is you wish to accomplish. Additionally, by publically promoting and renewing the vision you now have a vested interest in making it happen and to not let down those who will help you attain that vision. Remember that the details of how to achieve the vision falls under the process of creating goals, objectives, and action items. To learn how to create all these, refer to my Trestle Board series in ***The Maven’s Journal***.

Secondly, think in terms of the potential in others and motivate them with your clear and simple vision, as stated above; it takes a team to accomplish great things. Lincoln depended on his staff, his cabinet, and his generals to dig deep within them to do what is right for the Union and its people, all people. He particularly depended on the average citizen and foot soldier to overcome one obstacle after another, at a great deal of personal sacrifice, to persevere through incredible odds. Our obstacles in Freemasonry are nowhere near as critical, but the process for success is the same.

Thirdly, apply visioning to your mindset, picturing success. If you are a golfer, like I try to be, you may have been told by someone to visualize your shot. Picture the ball leaving the tee on a straight trajectory to the target; then hit the ball with confidence. President John F. Kennedy in September, 1962 promised to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade. How’s that for visioning? I am sure Lincoln, on many occasions, while sitting alone in the White House, pictured America united again, where all people enjoy the freedoms granted by the U.S. Constitution, working together toward healing the nation’s wounds. Again, Freemasonry is not the same thing, but visioning success is a powerful tool for inspiring others no matter what one hopes to accomplish. For example, when you visualize your lodge meeting is the room filled with participatory members? When you serve the public do you

visualize strong representation from your lodge and scores or hundreds of appreciative community citizens? When a lodge dinner event occurs do you visualize members gathering to plan the event with the banquet hall or other location filled to capacity with excitement in the air? Take a “blue sky” approach as if resources (money, people, and material) were not an issue. Then, find a way to overcome those obstacles as best you can.

So, the next time you have the responsibility to lead a team, be sure to visualize success and document your vision into a concise, clearly stated vision statement. Then, take every opportunity to continually promote your vision, renewing it for all to hear and support. Finally, depend on the potential in others to help realize the vision. Taking the time to do all of the above will help ensure success as a leader.