

John Deffenbaugh blog – In the Land of Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln has been in the news this month. It's the 150th anniversary of both the Emancipation Proclamation and Gettysburg Address, and Stephen Spielberg has taken the opportunity to pay homage. Lincoln is also directly relevant to what we might expect in coming weeks. Lincoln, when he met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, is said to have observed, "So you're the little lady who started this great war". If you've met Julie Bailey on the Core Programme, you might draw the analogy about her impact on the anticipated change resulting from Francis.

I face a dichotomy around Lincoln. I grew up in Illinois, the Land of Lincoln, and in our household we had the liberal values of the 1960s, based on what Lincoln espoused in the Civil War. This perspective was fine and dandy til my adulthood when I learned more about family heritage. We're Confederates through and through. My great grandfather Conquest Cross Harris (such a neat name) on my mother's side fought for the 12th Tenn in some of the great battles in the west. I recently walked his footsteps in Shiloh, the bloodiest battle of the war. My great-great grandfather Jesse Ralston on my father's fought for the Stonewall Brigade in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. We also owned slaves at some point. And Conquest's commander Nathan Bedford Forrest went on to form the Ku Klux Klan after the war.

So I take a lot of learning from Lincoln. So can Top Leaders.

Lincoln took a **system approach**. He was a lawyer, and used as source documents the Constitution that defined the union of states. This was not to be dissolved. He was clear what the system of the union comprised – states north and south. He could easily have allowed the south to walk away in 1860. Many in the north were of this persuasion. It's akin to the somewhat ambivalent English attitude to the Scots and Northern Irish – it goes under the heading of 'watch out for what you wish for'. Lincoln, however, was prepared to act on a matter of principle to retain and maintain the union – the system of the United States. As the pre-eminent Civil War historian Shelby Foote observed: **Before the Civil War it was said 'the United States are'. Grammatically, it was spoken that way and thought of as a collection of independent states. And after the war, it was always 'the United States is'... and that sums up what the war accomplished. It made 'us' an 'is'".** So what is your system? Is it an 'is' or 'are'?

Lincoln was sure of what he wanted at times. For those of you who have a **directive** inclination, look no further than Lincoln for inspiration. He suspended *habeas corpus*, brought in conscription, and fired generals (eventually) when they did not perform. Yet he brought into his cabinet his political rivals, gave considerable leeway to his generals, and worked hard to build up consensus behind critical decisions, like the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln had a true balance of leadership styles. It's also fair to say that in today's language we could say that he was a 'benevolent dictator'. For those of the 'no more heroes' school of leadership, they should reflect on the benefits of leaders like Lincoln. Interestingly, Chicago, in the Land of Lincoln – and now regarded as one of the great cities of the world – has benefitted considerably over the best part of 43 years though the somewhat directive leadership of the Mayors Daley, father and son Richard J and Richard M. Are you clear on your leadership style in the context of the system in which you work?

Finally, Lincoln was nothing if not concise. **Brevity** is the lesson. In my non-exec and board advisory roles I despair seeing board papers that are technically 'mince'. Way too many words, which always leads me to think that 'here are people with way too much time on their hands'. Perversely, it takes considerably more time to be concise. Each of Lincoln's 272 words in the Gettysburg Address count. Also read his second inaugural address – a lesson in brevity. Books are written about this short address. Compare this with what you submit to the board. As Mark Twain replied when asked by an editor for a 2 page short story in 2 days: **No can do 2 pages in 2 days. Can do 30 pages in 2 days. Need 30 days to do 2 pages.** Please take 30 days and give me 2 days of real value – this will give compound interest.

2013 is shaping up to be some year. Francis, economic growth, the Euro, Middle East, China-Japan. Top Leaders could do worse to think of the NHS in England as the Land of Lincoln as they face the impact of these challenges on their local system, leadership and communication. I'd sure feel at home.

John Deffenbaugh 22 Jan 2013