

Yin Leader: Abraham Lincoln

"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt." – A. Lincoln

In the West, we tend to emphasize leaders who are competitive, aggressive, outgoing and charismatic (a.k.a. extroverted). Extroversion is *yang*. *Yin* leaders are different. This series highlights those differences, pointing to effective leaders from today and throughout history that exemplify the other side of leadership. In truth, we need both kinds of leaders to be healthy and balanced in our organizations.

Abraham Lincoln famously grew up in the backwoods of Kentucky. He was a quiet introverted boy who kept mostly to himself. I still vividly recall reading *Meet Abraham Lincoln* as a child myself and being enamored with the images of the young Abe studying by the light of the fire in a primitive log cabin. He, like I, developed a love of books and learning from an early age. The largely self-educated Lincoln went on from rural life in Kentucky to become a lawyer, a politician in the State of Illinois, and ultimately the sixteenth president of the United States.

Abraham Lincoln is a great historical example of a *yin* leader. He was a constitutional leader, one who understood the necessity and importance of constitutional restraint, the rule of law, and working together with others. Leadership, in more recent times, has been described as a willingness be bold, to go it alone, or to take decisive action without the constraint of rules to slow down the process. Lincoln didn't operate this way; he was a steady consensus builder who tried to do things in an orderly manner. He is well known, in fact, for making his political opponents his most trusted advisors. This is an important trait of *yin* leaders who focus on the good of the whole and doing things properly.

Lincoln was also a very careful and deliberate man, these traits also deriving from his more introverted nature. He was slow to speak and quick to listen. He seems to have embodied a high level of emotional intelligence, especially displaying self-awareness and humility. He was a man who owned his mistakes, shared credit for team success and took blame for team mistakes. Because of his emotional intelligence, he engendered strong loyalty and a freedom to speak openly from those around him.

Lincoln also exemplifies the *yin* leader in his focus on the group as opposed to himself as an individual leader. This tends to be how *yin* leaders see the world. A recent article by P. S. Field (2011) notes the frequent use of the first person plural in Lincoln's communication. For Lincoln, it was almost always about "us" and how "we" can or should move forward together. In this way, he stands out from many contemporary leaders who articulate their own personal dreams for society. By using first-person plural language, Lincoln not only connected back to the founding fathers' "we the people," but also to the heart of a nation deeply divided by the scourge of slavery and in need of a great uniter. *Yin* leaders, with a natural tendency toward interdependence, are well-suited to leadership in such times.

The fourth trait that points to Lincoln's *yinness* as a leader is found in his lifelong struggle with melancholia. Many *yin* leaders feel deeper sadness or anxiety as they reflect on the brokenness of the world around them. This melancholy is often connected to a heightened sensitivity to outside stimuli that is core to introversion. Lincoln certainly felt this deeply. Not only did he have a likely internal predisposition toward such emotion, he also carried with him the pain from the loss of his mother at the young age of nine. He knew what it was like to experience loss and accordingly empathized with the plight of the slaves and their loss of the inherent dignity that rightly belongs to all members of the human race. The

ability to feel the pain of others and to empathize with them marks Lincoln and all other great leaders throughout history. The best leaders possess deep empathy that seems to come from healthy self-awareness and appropriate humility. They see the suffering of others and think in themselves, "Me too."

Lincoln is typically regarded as one of the top four or five presidents in U.S. history. [The other four are typically: Washington (*yin*), Jefferson (*yin*), Theodore Roosevelt (*yang*), and FDR (*yang*).] These four *yin* leadership traits of character as seen in Lincoln are much needed today. Lincoln exercised great self-restraint, setting aside his own desires for the sake of not only consensus-building but abiding by the rule of law. He was a humble man who used his higher levels of self-awareness and empathy to successfully build a diverse leadership team around him. He was a leader who emphasized group goals, ideals, and objectives, the things we can accomplish together. Lastly, he was a leader who felt the melancholy that frequently connects to the introverted side of the equation. This ability to feel the sadness of others may have been his strongest asset. The organizational world around us is crying out for leaders with these *yin* qualities today. Lincoln's life and legacy present an example worth following.

References

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