Lessons in Leadership

“Listening”

Understandings Gleaned from film:

Lincoln, 2012

**ORGL 535 – Listen Discern Decide –**

**Chosen Artifact –** conveys and symbolizes the leadership competency of **listening.**

**Introduction:**

Abraham Lincoln is “plagued” by inner listening, as presented by the film Lincoln; his incessant dream. His wife rightly defines the dream as his preoccupation with passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. His zeal for the passage of the amendment was substantiated in his own “grounding;” in who he was, in an immovable assuredly of the “rightness” of the cause, his tremendous foresight, and his ability to apply listening–first criteria in both the individual and the group process. From whence comes the capacity for such skills? An exploration of this film follows, with gleaned insight for concepts of listening-first, decision-making, listening levels or types, and the effects of the practice of such concepts on President Lincoln, political parties, and society.

The film, though based on only a few pages of Doris Goodwin’s book, Team of Rivals, seeks to explain how Lincoln was able to ensure passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, in the House of Representatives. This accomplishment is largely due to Lincoln being a servant-leader, “we need the strongest men of the party in the Cabinet. We needed to hold our own people together. I had looked the party over and concluded that these were the very strongest men. Then I had no right to deprive the country of their services.” - Abraham Lincoln. These former rivals where the men he listened to during his decision-making process. New York Senator and former governor William Seward, Missouri Attorney General Edward Bates, Ohio Governor Salmon Chase, all major contenders with Lincoln, for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860. They filled out his cabinet at State, Attorney General, Treasury, respectively. Stanton is later brought in at Secretary of War. Seward and Stanton respected and supported him, assisting in the passage of the amendment. Chase tried, unsuccessfully undermine Lincoln. However, in the end he appointed him, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, because, in servant-leadership like fashion, he believed him to be the best choice to secure the rights of the new future black citizens. Lincoln’s capacity to listen-first, even to opponents, is reflected in the film.

**Listening-first**

In one of the opening scenes. Lincoln is seated alone amidst the confusion of troop movement, dismal weather prevails, yet he is devoid of distractions amidst the activity. He is a picture of peace, even with tremendous weight upon him. He is engaged in conversation, about the fight at Jenkins Ferry, with two black soldiers. He is focused, applies nonverbal acknowledgments, has a relaxed and open body expression, doesn’t interrupt, doesn’t interrogate, maintains eye contact, asks open ended questions and is “present.” Burley-Allen describes these attributes as, “a detailed description of the active listening mode” (Burley-Allen, M., 1995, p. 128). This was Lincoln’s listening approach, which he used continually with outstanding effect.

The young black soldier is cast as somewhat impetuous, even mildly deriding of the president for perceived short comings (pay discrepancies, lack of “Negro” officers, etc.) and seeks redress, while the older soldier is reluctant to engage at that level. Both appreciative of the meeting, the younger more impassioned and vocal. In the midst of this soldier’s emotional plea Lincoln asks, “What will you do after the war, corporal?” A seemingly out of place question, yet integral to his “knowing,” his understanding of “a sense of history,” a point Greenleaf contends is critical to a servant-leader’s “know” (Greenleaf R., 1996, p 236).

As the scene proceeds two white soldiers enter. Lincoln calmly listens to all without judgment or correction. He asks the white soldiers if they heard what he said at Gettysburg, because of their excitement on seeing Lincoln and having heard the speech. This scene effectively shows the difference in having “heard” and having “listened”. They unite to recite segments of the memorized Gettysburg Address, one having some difficulty completing, yet both heard and affected by it. The young black soldier holds back as the men are moving out. He begins to recite the rest of the address, while departing, and with a greater degree of eloquence. However, with him there is a different quality in his recital; a great awe, a more poignant expression- the result of having “listened.” What he heard had moved into meaning; real meaning. This man’s experience allowed him to tap deeply into himself because of what he had heard from Lincoln. He, as a listener, was able to make the “leap of imagination that connects the verbal concepts to the listener’s own experience” (Greenleaf, R., 1996, p.304). What he listened to captured his imagination, he attached “*meaning* [to it]- a growth in [his] experience as a result of receiving the communication.” This young man was able to “supply the imaginative link from [his] fund of experience to the abstract language symbols” (Greenleaf, R., et al), which Lincoln used in his delivery. This imaginative link allowed for a great depth of understanding and meaning which the white soldiers appeared unable to tap into. The tone, tenor, cadence, and tambour used by this black soldier, as he walked away reciting the rest of the address, admirably captures, in one scene, how effective a communicator Lincoln was. The obvious respect for this man evidenced by his recital. There is also an important element of listening, captured by this soldier, only made possible by Lincoln. His speeches are known for their brevity, this one in particular. Lincoln knew how to “say just enough to make that leap of the imagination feasible” (Greenleaf, R., et al). Lincoln was able to have a profound impact precisely because he was adept at listening-first. The scene implies group listening of all the soldiers; all impacted, yes, equally so, no. It also shows Lincoln’s penchant to listen-first. This quality, more than any other, informed his decision-making process.

**Listening-first characteristic and decision-making by Lincoln**

“If we but knew where we are and whither we are tending, we might better know what to do now” (Greenleaf, R., 1996, p. 204). He used “listening” as a mechanism to “know.” “Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first”* (Frick, 2011, p. forward). This is how he learned what he needed to know for the challenge ahead.

Lincoln is a powerful study in the mastery of many of the criteria needed for a listening-first mentality. “A servant-leader listener constantly practices the behaviors that communicate *presence,* like asking clarifying questions and reflecting ideas, feelings and emotions. Finally, it requires a capacity to accept human imperfection”(Frick, 2011, p.6). Lincoln’s taping Chase for Chief Justice shows he understood the latter. “Learning the skills of paraphrasing, clarifying, checking perceptions and summarizing; Active Listening” (Frick, 2011, p.9) were his benchmarks as a listener. As support for this contention lets evaluate some of the film’s scenes.

Blair, who founded the Republican Party, along with another strong supporter of the conservative element of that party want Lincoln to entertain war ending negotiations with the rebels. This powerful wing of the party would support the Thirteenth Amendment only if negotiations are attempted first. Lincoln listens silently to their emotional bid. It is obvious he needs their support, listening patiently, respectfully, and non-judgmentally. Silence follows, of which he is unafraid, and even with misgiving approves the attempted peace negotiation plan.

In another scene, a report about the attack on Port Wilmington is given by the Sectary of War, to the cabinet. Harsh words arise from a cabinet member about Lincoln pushing for the Thirteenth Amendment. One cabinet member explains that the Emancipation Proclamation was simply a war measure, easily retracted at the end of hostilities. Again, he listens and is not offended. He immerges from this intent listening to explain his position, for the amendment. He starts with a story and “draws the cabinet in,” a lesson on group listening. He articulates soundly, rationally, even with his apprehension of its legality, a well-reasoned argument for his action, even speculating that these former slaves could be ordered back into slavery after the war. He pauses, using silence after he brings a rhetorical question to the cabinet. At the end, he asks the cabinet to stand behind him on the issue. He listens, without offence, as one of the cabinet members compares him to a dictator, calmly replying with reason, even saying he might be wrong. He listened to the objections but still is convinced of the rightness of his actions. Group and individual listening in action, again part of Lincoln’s decision making process.

**Burley-Allen 3 listening Levels (types)**

#1 Lincoln is sitting in the telegraph room with the telegraph operator and an engineer. He is trying to decide whether to bring the confederate delegation to Washington to discuss peace negotiations, a troubling decision, considering the ramifications for passage of the amendment. The two men are waiting, in rapt attention, his direction. “Are we fitted to the time to which we were born,” Lincoln askes. The operator says, not him but maybe Lincoln. There is deep empathetic listening on both sides. Lincoln then asks the engineer what he thinks. He, seemingly surprised by being asked his opinion says, “me, well I reckon…” With that Lincoln moves noticeably forward in his chair, all his attention on this young man, his forearm planted on the table leaning towards the man. A point in his response, causes Lincoln after attentive listening, to capture, in that moment, a profound principle. Relating to this young engineer, using Euclid and mathematics principles, he connects. He connects to the self-evident truth of a 2000-year-old mathematical rule. This engagement, this empathetic listening, allows Lincoln to clarify his own thinking. An asked question, brought further light - a deeper understanding. The result? Lincoln changes the original telegraph to convey the peace delegation only so far, but NOT to come to Washington, until further orders from the president. A monumental decision was reached, having incredible historic consequences, all for a question through a listening-first attitude. He touches each young man’s shoulder as he leaves. One man stands as the president leaves, unseen by him, as a sign of respect. The President of the United States had just listened to them, had showed a profound respect for them. Burley-Allen notes that “touching or non-verbal” behaviors are “strokes” of recognition. Further, “listening is one of the finest strokes one person can give another.” (Burley-Allen, M., 1995, p. 26) A capacity, which Lincoln had developed to the point of it being a part of his nature, thus a natural expression of himself as a servant-leader.

#2 Seward is arguing with Lincoln about the peace delegation and how it will ruin the chance of getting a positive vote for thirteenth amendment. Lincoln again is listening. Seward is agitated, certain they can’t get the votes if word gets out of the southern peace delegation. Seward tell him it is either “the amendment or the confederate peace, you can’t have both.” Lincoln replies, “If you can look into the seeds of time, and says which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me. Time is a great thickener of things.” To which Seward replies, “yes, I suppose it is,” but quickly adds, “I have no idea what you mean by that.” Level 2 listening- “hearing the words but not really listening” (Burley-Allen, et al). Seward could not understand the deeper meaning. He did not hear the deeper meaning of Lincoln’s intent.

#3 Lincoln and Representative Stevens are having a discussion in a secluded basement, about the vote for the amendment. Lincoln is trying to get Steven to temper his zeal as to the issue of freedom for the emancipated slave. Stevens supports a radical approach. Though both want the same thing, Lincoln wants a more moderate approach, convinced any other methodology will ensure failure on all political fronts. Neither can find common ground. Both are lost in Level 3 listening. They are somewhat aware of the other but really, they are “paying attention to themselves.” Both only follow enough of the conversation to get a chance to talk. Both men were formulating rebuttals and making judgement about the other. Interestingly it appears, as they sit in silence, neither has convinced the other of their position.

This brings into question, for me, an extrapolated interesting concept. What if Lincoln had not strenuously made his position known to Stevens, for the sake of wanting to listen at a higher level? Could these words, which would have gone unspoken, have made the difference when Stevens was “set up” during the house debate. Could the very words, that appeared to have been uttered without being listened to by Stevens, been the ones that caused him to answer the question about “equality of all men,” in a more tempered fashion, to ensure passage of the amendment? We will never know. However, it is an interesting concept to contemplate when one considers not saying something, because another may not listen on the level to which we desire.

**Conclusion**

In this module, we were challenged to further develop a more profoundly relational, and integrative disposition; learning to listen-first seeking clarity before influence. This last component, in the film, was pivotal.

In the Servant-leader Dispositions Capacities and Skills Form we are enjoined to appreciate that a “Servant-consciousness arises from serving-first, is inherently transforming, and is inspired by compassion, generosity, gratitude and joy” (Horsman, J., 2017, p.1). If we have a disposition towards servant-leadership certain capacities should be self-evident. Among which are empathy, community, listening-first, foresight, and system thinking. Certain values and skills inform a servant-leader’s disposition and capacity. A few values stand out. The values of “seeking awareness, integrity, and humility” was seen in the mentor’s gallery, the film, and by students posts. A powerful display of “seeking justice and forgiveness” was masterfully portrayed in the closing of Lincoln, where he delivers his second Inaugural Address; “with malice towards none…, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”

The whole of the film captures the president’s capacity for foresight, as well as his practice of persuasive influence. This value is especially seen in his attempts to obtain the final few votes for the passage of the thirteenth amendment. Listening-first is a powerful inducement for an interdependence dynamic, which produces growth for all servant-leaders in training. Realizing a dependency on each other builds community, has the power to transform, and can inspire us to greater heights. “Each of us can actually *care* about other’s responses because they are small pieces of the glorious journey of living” (Frick, 2011, p. 26).

Biography

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Horsman, J. H. Foundations of the Philosophy of Servant-leadership: Chapter 1, On Serving-first, class syllabus.

Lincoln, 2012, Film, directed by Spielberg, S., Production Company, DreamWorks Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Reliance Entertainment, Participant Media, Amblin Entertainment, The Kennedy/Marshall Company, Distributed by Walt Disney Studios.