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The Servant Leadership of Abraham Lincoln

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Abstract

The article encompasses a theoretical servant leadership model that includes humility and empathy with respect to the United States presidency, specifically Abraham Lincoln's time in office. Empathizing can be seen with respect to Lincoln's understanding both sides of an issue in order to make an informed and best decision possible regarding the United States' well-being. Lincoln's time as President during the Civil War gave him the opportunity to show this empathy to both the North and the South through his speeches, significantly, his second inaugural address.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Abraham Lincoln, Jesus Christ, empathy, U.S. Presidency

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
 — *Philippians 2:5-11*

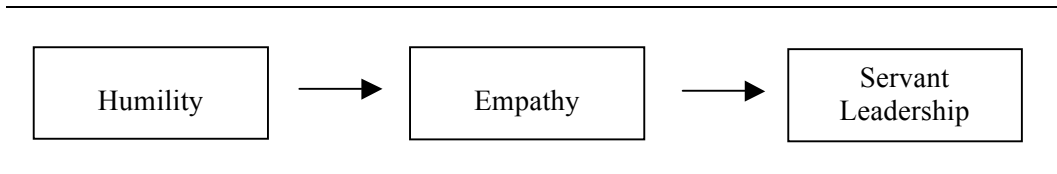
Servant leadership can be characterized by ten traits: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building communities (Crippen, 2004, p. 13). The trait that is exhibited most in the passage above is empathy. Parolini (2004) stated that "Servant leaders are defined by their ability to bring integrity, humility, and servanthood into caring for, empowering, and developing others in carrying out tasks and processes of visioning, goal setting, leading, modeling, team building, and shared-decision making" (p. 9). Therefore, we will look at empathy in United States (U.S.) political leadership as it pertains to the U.S. presidency, specifically the presidency of Abraham Lincoln and how humility promotes empathy and eventually cultivates into servant leadership. Lincoln, in an address to Congress on December 3, 1861, stated "The struggle of today is not altogether for today -- it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence, all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us" (Lincoln, 1861). The aforementioned quote can apply to any political leader and the importance of studying Lincoln as a servant leader will lead to a greater understanding of the theory of servant leadership with respect to the U.S. presidency and other national political offices as well in present day.

According to Marchal (2007), Jesus was a servant leader in that "One proposal suggests that the hymn echoes the Suffering Servant image of Isaiah 53, especially in its affirmation that Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2:8, NASB)." (p. 247). Since Jesus humbled himself as a servant even until the point of death, then He should be seen as a servant leader. This claim can be supported by the following: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians, 2:5-7, NASB). In order to reach his followers, Jesus needed to be among his followers to show he was truly the son of God.

Leaders must be able to be compassionate towards others. Greenleaf states "Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted" (Crippen, 2004, p.

13). “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8, NASB) supports the aforementioned claim. Therefore, the case can be made for a theoretical model, seen in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Overview of Theoretical Model.



Humility & Empathy

According to Winston (1999), a leader “should love their subordinates, peers, superiors, as well as their competitors. Showing concern for others and putting their needs and interests to the fore demonstrate empathy and elicit trust”. Patterson (2003) states that humility is one of the seven constructs of servant leadership, the others include follower empowerment, altruism, trust, agape love, visionary characteristics, and serving others. Moreover, Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) created an instrument that can help leaders assess their own levels of servant leadership. “The researchers used a 71 item scale and factor analysis that contributed to finding 42 items that produced five factors - empowerment, love, humility, trust; and vision” (pp. 607-609).

How do humility and empathy relate to one another? In order to empathize with followers, leaders must first humble themselves. In other words, they must think that they are no better than their followers. Additionally, leaders who possess the ability to act humbly with respect to knowledge in their specific field are eager to learn new facets of that field. A humble leader openly admits his/her mistakes and learns from them. Finally, a humble leader focuses on empowering followers, rather than building his/her ego (Patterson, 2003).

Furthermore, empathy from leaders promotes trust between a leader and his followers. Although Jesus did not come to the earth to become a political leader in the modern sense, He paved the way for political leaders by setting an example of using empathy as a tool of servant leadership. Jesus was sent by God to walk among the living in order to gain our trust and to teach obedience to the Father. Philippians 2:8 supports this claim by stating “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (NASB). He endured the pain that most of us can never imagine. Jesus needed to come to Earth as a man in order to show others what it is to be obedient to God the Father (Guzik, 2003).

Lincoln as a Servant Leader

When we think of empathy within the office of the U.S. presidency, we often think of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln is a figure who showed a great deal of empathy throughout his entire political life. “Lincoln did not merely possess a strategic mind, although he

excelled at political calculation. Even as a political novice, with empathy as his guide, Lincoln possessed an innate ability to intuit the motivations of his interlocutors” (Shogan, 2009, p. 863). Essentially, Lincoln was able to see both sides of the political arena. For example, Lincoln did not like the idea of slavery; however, he also felt empathy for the slave owners. “As much as he could, Lincoln tried to place himself in the position of the slave owners to better understand their point of view” (p. 864), this inclination towards compassion for either side can be confirmed by a letter written to Joshua Speed. The following excerpt from this letter describes a trip to New Orleans and had a great impact regarding his opinion on slavery.

You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with irons. That sight was a continued torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave border. It is hardly fair for you to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the Constitution and the Union. I do oppose the extension of slavery because my judgment and feeling so prompt me, and I am under no obligations to the contrary. If for this you and I must differ, differ we must. You say, if you were President, you would send an army and hang the leaders of the Missouri outrages upon the Kansas elections; still, if Kansas fairly votes herself a slave State she must be admitted, or the Union must be dissolved. But how if she votes herself a slave State unfairly, that is, by the very means for which you say you would hang men? (Lincoln, 1855).

Consequently, this disagreement between the two men and the empathy in which Lincoln shows in agreeing to disagree can be supported by Colossians 3:12-14.

”Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (NASB).

Moreover, Lincoln’s empathy turned his enemies into supporters. “After Lincoln won the presidency in 1860, he knew that he had defeated others who had more experience than him. He might have embraced hubris and created formidable political enemies. Instead, he stroked bruised egos and gained several political allies; Lincoln transformed his enemies into his supporters throughout his career” (Shogan, 2009, p. 864).

Additionally, empathy in a political leadership role allows the president to “see the whole picture. Unlike members of Congress, the president is a national representative. Representing the entire nation is an impossible task, yet empathy can enable a president to comprehend the plight of others he does not know intimately. As president, Lincoln

read a letter from a young woman whose father had been killed in the Civil War, and who had entered a dark depression after his death” (Shogan, 2009, p. 865). The letter from the young woman enabled Lincoln to understand how the war was affecting those surrounded by it. This type of knowledge in a democratic country, such as the United States, is crucial in making decisions for the whole.

Another example of Lincoln as a servant leader is a quote that was written in a letter to constituents that was read by James Conkling on August 26, 1863 to Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois. With the United States in the middle of the Civil War, Lincoln felt he could not leave Washington, D. C. The following is an excerpt from the speech noting how peace can be restored to the nation.

There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say: You desire peace; and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways. First, to suppress the rebellion by force of arms. This I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is to give up the Union. I am against this. Are you for it? If you are, you should say so plainly. If you are not for *force*, nor yet for *dissolution*, there only remains some imaginable *compromise*. I do not believe any compromise, embracing the maintenance of the Union, is now possible. All I learn, leads to a directly opposite belief. The strength of the rebellion is its military — its army. That army dominates all the country, and all the people, within its range. Any offer of terms made by any man or men within that range, in opposition to that army, is simply nothing for the present; because such man or men, have no power whatever to enforce their side of a compromise, if one were made with them. To illustrate. Suppose refugees from the South, and peace men of the North, get together in convention, and frame and proclaim a compromise embracing a restoration of the Union; in what way can that compromise be used to keep Lee’s army out of Pennsylvania? Meade’s army can keep Lee’s army out of Pennsylvania; and I think, can ultimately drive it out of existence. But no paper compromise, to which the controllers of Lee’s army are not agreed, can at all affect that army. In an effort at such compromise we should waste time, which the enemy would improve to our disadvantage; and that would be all. A compromise, to be effective, must be made either with those who control the rebel army, or with the people first liberated from the domination of that army, by the success of our own army. Now allow me to assure you, that no word or intimation, from that rebel army, or from any of the men controlling it, in relation to any peace compromise, has ever come to my knowledge or belief. All charges and insinuations to the contrary, are deceptive and groundless. And I promise you, that if any such proposition shall hereafter come, it shall not be rejected, and kept a secret from you. I freely acknowledge myself the servant of the people, according to the bond of service — the

United States Constitution; and that, as such, I am responsible to them
(Lincoln, 1863).

Moreover, empathy encourages intuitive speech which can be seen from Lincoln's second inaugural address. "The sentence 'Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other' is an attempt by Lincoln to force Northerners and Southerners to understand the common tradition that still united them. By its very construction, the careful listener must put himself in the position of the other. For example, Lincoln did not say, 'Those from the North and the South read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.' His use of the word 'both' forces the listener to look into the heart of his opponent" (Shogan, 2009, p. 865). Lincoln shows in his speech that both the North and the South are equal in God's eyes by the common thread of the Bible.

Conclusion

Humility, empathy and servant leadership are all linked together. In order for a leader to be able to lead, he/she must know the issues that plague the followers, thereby exercising humility and exhibiting empathy with those followers. With respect to the U.S. presidency, Abraham Lincoln understood his constituents by empathizing with them. "Lincoln is the true hero of this examination because he displayed an almost uncanny ability to master empathy. Instead of allowing his emotions to control him, Lincoln utilized empathy to help him predict the behavior of his opponents. His willingness to see the world from another's viewpoint also enabled him to figure out ways in which he could convert enemies into allies. Lincoln's capacity for empathy was probably innate, yet the political benefits he culled from it are worthy of attention and analysis" (Shogan, 2009, p. 875). Future studies of other leaders should be conducted in order to test the theoretical model further.

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