

# **The Wonder of Interpersonal Relationships VIb: Abraham Lincoln as an Exemplar of Relating Midst Differences**

**William Bergquist, Ph.D.**

Abraham Lincoln was an exceptional leader in many respects and certainly stands out among American presidents as a person of courage and vision. There is one particular aspect of his leadership that is noteworthy regarding the sustaining of relationships despite major differences in perspectives, values and practices. Lincoln was willing to bring in men to his cabinet that had been opponents during the election that brought him to the presidency.

These were political rivals who not only strongly disagreed with him during their run for the presidency, but also were powerful in their own right and brought with them a devoted constituency who opposed many of Abraham Lincoln's priorities and policies. They also differed with one another. Later, they often competing with one another for Lincoln's support and for political alignment with one another during the tumultuous years of the Lincoln presidency.

Yet, despite these profound and powerful differences between Lincoln and his rivals and the differences among his rivals with one another, Lincoln invited these powerful men to join with him in leading the United States through a period of major turmoil and conflict. He made use of the diverse perspectives and opinions of these men to navigate through the American civil war—the VUCA-Plus of his own time.

Among those historians who have written about Abraham Lincoln and his leadership skills, one stands out in focusing on his skill in entertaining the diverse perspectives of those with whom he often disagreed. This historian was Doris Kearns Goodwin (2005) who wrote about the political genius of Abraham Lincoln as he assembled and made effective use of a "the team of rivals." While Kearns Goodwin provides a highly detailed account of Lincoln's use of cabinet-level rivals in running the country, I will cut to the chase by offering some of her summary statements and conclusions that are offered right at the start of her book. I begin with her observations about the state of Lincoln's presidency at the start of his term(s) in office.

## **A VUCA-Plus State**

To put it bluntly, this state was not one of strength or credibility. As Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. xv-xvi) notes:

When Lincoln won the nomination, each of his celebrated rivals believed the wrong man had been chosen. Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled his first reception of the news that the "comparatively unknown name of Lincoln" had been selected: "we heard the result coldly and sadly. It seemed too rash, on a purely local reputation, to build so grave a trust in such anxious times."

Lincoln seemed to have come from nowhere—a backwoods lawyer who had served one undistinguished term in the House of Representatives and had lost two consecutive contests for the U. S. Senate. Contemporaries and historians alike have attributed his surprising nomination

to chance--the fact that he came from the battleground state of Illinois and stood in the center of his party.

All of this would suggest that Lincoln was likely to have an unsuccessful single term in office—especially given the major challenges associated with leading a country that was deeply divided.

Kearns Goodwin (2005, p xvi) offers “a different interpretation.” She proposes that it is precisely in the midst of these conditions that Lincoln exhibited his remarkable skills. He was equipped to artfully navigate a political environment that was not just complicated (with many parts) but also complex (these parts being tightly interconnected).

When viewed against the failed efforts of his rivals, it is clear that Lincoln won the nomination because he was shrewdest and canniest of them all. More accustomed to relying upon himself to shape events, he took the greatest control of the process leading up to the nomination, displaying a fierce ambition, an exceptional political acumen, and a wide range of emotional strengths, forged in the crucible of personal hardship, that took his unsuspecting rivals by surprise.

I would suggest that Abraham Lincoln was facing a challenge condition of what in contemporary times, we might call VUCA-Plus (Bergquist, 2020). This is a condition where volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C), and ambiguity (A)—as well as turbulence and contradiction—are reigning supreme. From this VUCA-Plus perspective, we might say that Lincoln already knew about and navigated through the conditions of volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity in his “crucible of personal hardship.” The VUCA-Plus conditions of volatility, ambiguity and turbulence were fully present. Uncertainty regarding the future of the United States (as a young country) was also present. Furthermore, contradictions were to be found in the positions held by all of the political factions.

## **Agility**

Unlike many of his political rivals, Lincoln knew little about social status and privilege. He was not firmly connected to the entrenched political network of the Eastern United States, thus was free to navigate the turbulent waters of mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century America with cognitive agility. Furthermore, with all of the challenges he overcame with agility in winning the presidential election, Lincoln went on to exhibit the same agility in his appointment of men (not even Lincoln could bring himself to select women) to his cabinet. While the precedence up until his time (and frankly since his time) was to select men with whom the new president agreed – and often with whom he had worked during the presidential campaign—the decisions made by Lincoln defied this precedence. He brought in his rivals.

Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. xvi) highlights the remarkable nature of Lincoln’s cabinet choices:

That Lincoln, after winning the presidency, made the unprecedented decision to incorporate his eminent rivals into his political family, the cabinet, was evidence of a profound self-confidence and a first indication of what would prove to others a most unexpected greatness. Seward became secretary of state, Chase secretary of the treasury, and Bates attorney general. The remaining top posts Lincoln offered to three former Democrats [Lincoln was a Republican] . . . Gideon Welles, Lincoln's "Neptune," was made secretary of the navy, Montgomery Blair became postmaster general, and Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's "Mars," eventually became secretary of war.

She (Kearns-Goodwin, 2005, p. xvi) goes on to note that:

Every member of this administration was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than Lincoln. Their presence in the cabinet might have threatened to eclipse the obscure prairie lawyer from Springfield.

### **The “Insanity” of Working with Rivals**

Isn't it “insane” for a new president to increase levels of volatility, uncertainty, and turbulence by bringing in powerful people with differing views? Doesn't Lincoln have enough contradiction in his own views regarding preservation of the union—and the matter of slavery? Aren't matters complex enough without adding competing interests? Does Lincoln really need to “muddy the water” with greater diversity of perspectives given that everything already seemed to be saturated with ambiguity? Most importantly, doesn't Lincoln risk the loss of control given the power and influence which his rivals bring to the Presidential cabinet?

Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. xvi-xvii) observes that Lincoln was not only able to overcome these challenges, but actually turn them around to his benefit:

It soon became clear . . . that Abraham Lincoln would emerge the undisputed captain of this most unusual cabinet, truly a team of rivals. The powerful competitors who had originally disdained Lincoln became colleagues who helped him steer the country through its darkest days. Seward was the first to appreciate Lincoln's remarkable talents, quickly realizing the futility of his plan to relegate the president to a figurehead role. In the months that followed, Seward would become Lincoln's closest friend and advisor in the administration. Though Bates initially viewed Lincoln as a well-meaning but incompetent administrator, he eventually concluded that the president was an unmatched leader, “very near being a perfect man.” Edwin Stanton, who had treated Lincoln with contempt at their initial acquaintance, developed a great respect for the commander in chief and was unable to control his tears for weeks after the president's death. Even Chase, whose restless ambition for the presidency was never realized, at last acknowledged that Lincoln had outmaneuvered him.

This preliminary statement regarding Lincoln's skill in working with rivals and the outcomes of his partnering with those differ from himself sets the stage from Kearns Goodwin's documentation of his strategies and accomplishments (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, p. xvii)

This, then, is a story of Lincoln's political genius revealed through his extraordinary array of personal qualities that enabled him to form friendships with men who had previously opposed him; to repair injured feelings that, left untended, might have escalated into permanent hostility; to assume responsibility for the failures of subordinates; to share credit with ease; and to learn from mistakes. He possessed an acute understanding of the sources of power inherent in the presidency, an unparalleled ability to keep his governing coalition intact, a tough-minded appreciation of the need to protect his presidential prerogatives, and a masterful sense of timing. His success in dealing with the strong egos of the men in his cabinet suggests that in the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality--kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty, and empathy--can also be impressive political resources.

## Resilience

There is one other important point that Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. xvii) makes regarding the makeup of Abraham Lincoln's character as leader during trying, VUCA-Plus times. She focuses briefly in this introductory statement on Lincoln's emotional resilience – a strength that I believe is particularly important when one is sustaining a relationship with someone who comes from a quite different world (regarding perspective, values and even practices).

. . . Lincoln suffered from chronic depression. Yet, with the exception of two despondent episodes in his early life that are described in this story; there is no evidence that he was immobilized by depression. On the contrary, even during the worst days of the war, he retained his ability to function at a very high level.

The major reason why Lincoln was able to manage his own emotions and remain resilient in the midst of stressful conditions might reside in his capacity to reflect on his own psychological state – a level of cognitive and emotional maturity that is exceptional.

It is this capacity for meta-cognition and emotional regulation that enabled Lincoln to navigate the VUCA-Plus waters better than his “rivals” (Kearns Goodwin, 2006, p. xvii):

. . . Lincoln possessed an uncanny understanding of his shifting moods, a profound self-awareness that enabled him to find constructive ways to alleviate sadness and stress. Indeed, when he is compared with his colleagues, it is clear that he possessed the most even-tempered disposition of them all. Time and again, he was the one who dispelled his colleagues' anxiety and sustained their spirits with his gift for storytelling and his life-affirming sense of humor. When resentment and contention threatened to destroy his administration, he refused to be provoked by petty grievances, to submit to jealousy, or to brood over perceived slights. Through the appalling pressures he faced day after day, he retained an unflagging faith in his country's cause.

Lincoln's meta-cognitive capacity and ability to regulate his emotions often were evident not only in his direct addressing of complex issues—and his shifting attitudes regarding these issues—but also in his storytelling (often about his own “inadequacies”) and in the many jokes he told. These folksy anecdotes always conveyed a telling insight—often about himself. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 711) shares one of these jokes:

I [Lincoln] felt a good deal like the sick man in Illinois who was told he probably hadn't many days longer to live, and he ought to make his peace with any enemies he might have. He said the man he hated worst of all was a fellow named Brown, in the next village. So Brown was sent for and when he came the sick man began to say, in a voice as meek as Moses's, that he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow creatures, and he hoped he and Brown could now shake hand and bury all their enmity. The scene was becoming altogether too pathetic for Brown, who had to get out his handkerchief and wipe the gathering tears from his eyes....After a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone Brown had about reached the room door when the sick man rose up on his elbow and called out to him: 'But see here, Brown; if I should happen to get well, mind, that old grudge stands.'

It is in this story that Lincoln quite eloquently conveys something about his own strategy in working with his team of rivals. It reflects something about his own reasoning and even his own shortcomings. Lincoln can work with his rivals as long as the illness (civil war) prevails, but need not collaborate or even interact with them once the healing has occurred (victory is achieved).

Lincoln knows that he is human—like the sick man from his home state of Illinois. As is the case with most other people, he doesn't want to hang around for long with those who hold quite different perspectives. He can hold a grudge for many years. Yet, Abraham Lincoln can retain relationships despite differences on behalf of a greater goal (winning the war) and greater mission (preserving the union).

## **Evolving and Innovating**

If we can step back from Lincoln's skill as a leader and his accomplishments—as we did with J. S. Bach—we find that several contemporary psychologists have something to say about Lincoln's insightful decision to bring in his rivals—as related to the power of diversity and the attendant openness to new ideas.

Diversity is required when an environment is complex. Lincoln required that his presidential cabinet included members with diverse ideas because the environment in which his cabinet would be operating was filled with complexity (as well as the other five VUCA-Plus conditions). One extended example of Lincoln's use of his team of rivals to deal with a complex issue centered on his interactions with General George McClelland, who headed his armed forces during the early years of the Civil War. Lincoln was quite ambivalent about McClelland.

### **Ambivalence and McClelland**

On the one hand, he greatly admired McClelland's military expertise (at least during the first years of the war). On the other hand, Lincoln was offended by McClelland's failure to acknowledge Lincoln's presidential authority or to even grant Lincoln the courtesy of meeting with him on many occasions. Members of Lincoln's cabinet offered a wide variety of opinions regarding McClelland, as a general and as someone with whom they wanted to work. It was in the midst of this diverse set of perspectives that Lincoln was able to sort through his own views of McClelland.

For instance, War Secretary Stanton was just as disgruntled as Lincoln when he often had to wait for McClelland when coming to the War Department for a scheduled meeting. The arrogance of the General was a source of agitation for both Lincoln and Stanton. One of the outcomes was that Stanton and Lincoln began to spend more time together (rather than spending time with McClelland).

Despite their shared annoyance and failure on the battlefield, Lincoln was hesitant to replace McClelland even though members of congress were pressuring him to do so. He did restrict McClelland's appointment to that of Army of the Potomac command and brought in John Charles Fremont to command a new unit of the army. While this infuriated many conservatives in and outside his party, Lincoln received the unexpected support of Monty Blair (his postmaster general), who came from a powerful, conservative family.

Repeatedly, during the early years of the Civil War, Lincoln was faced with major pressure from many of the most influential members of his cabinet to oust McClelland. Yet, he determined that morale of the army which McClelland commanded would be shattered if their general was replaced by someone else—and who would replace McClelland? Yet, the pressure remained on Lincoln to watch McClelland carefully and to restrict the scope of his command.

Eventually, Lincoln did have to replace this arrogant (and ultimately incompetent) general. After further failure to find the right person to command the Union forces, Lincoln finally did find competence in Ulysses S. Grant—even if this competence was based in an often-brutal stubbornness. Abraham Lincoln finds guidance from his team of rivals for his challenging navigation of complex waters. Members of his cabinet come from several different political perspectives and offer him support (as well as guidance) from these different points of view.

### **Diversity and Evolution**

In seeking to understand how diversity aides this navigation through complexity, I turn to the field of evolutionary biology and to the study of complex adaptive system. I begin by introducing a classic (sometimes controversial) biological model called the Hardy-Weinberg Equilibrium. This model provides some rich insight for not only those interested in evolutionary change, but also those leaders, like Lincoln, who are facing the challenge of navigating VUCA-Plus conditions. The Hardy-Weinberg Equilibrium model works backwards regarding evolutionary change—it is about the assumptions that lead to NON-change in terms of biological evolution.

The first assumption is that there are no mutations in a population. This would mean that all of the genes that form the basis of all life forms are the same for all members of one species. There is no room, in other words, for variations or mistakes. I suggest that this assumption (as well as the four other assumptions) can be applied to life in a mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century—as well as in mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

If the Hardy-Weinberg assumptions are descriptive of systems (such as an organization, community or even entire nation), then this system is likely to remain in equilibrium and innovation is unlikely to occur. The center might hold, but at the expense of the agility needed for this system to remain viable—especially if it is situated in a VUCA-Plus environment. The key, therefore, for a leader such as Lincoln is to ensure that the first assumption (and other four assumptions) isn't being met.

### **Mutations and Organizational Variation**

If there are no mutations in a population then evolution will not take place. If there are no mutations (diverse perspectives) in Lincoln's cabinet, then he is less likely to entertain a new strategy regarding the management of his arrogant general. There is no room for variations or mistakes in a system in equilibrium—or a cabinet composed of men (and no women) with uniform perspectives.

What are the implications: innovation requires that things are not always going right in an organization? There must be variations if the organization is to generate innovations. Scott Page (2011) writes about the generation of multiple ideas (mutations) and suggests that a world filled with many perspectives is one in which good ideas, clear thinking and accurate information is likely to emerge: “if we have lots of

diverse paths . . . , we are not likely to make mistakes. If we only have a few paths, mistakes are likely.“ (Page, 2011, p. 240) Page makes the strong case for the important interplay between complexity and diversity. Systems that are complex and diverse will be more resilient and amenable to change:

Systems that produce complexity consist of diverse rule-following entities whose behaviors are interdependent. . . . I find it helpful to think of complex systems as “large” in Walt Whitman’s sense of containing contradictions. They tend to be robust and at the same time capable of producing large events. They can attain equilibria, both fixed points and simple patterns, as well as produce long random sequences. (Page, 2011, pg. 17)

There is one thing we have learned in recent years with regard to the viability of systems that has almost become an axiom: if there is extensive variability (disturbance) within the environment in which an organization operates, then there must also be extensive variability (diversity) inside the organization. Page identifies this axiom as the Law of Requisite Variety:

. . . the greater the diversity of possible responses, the more disturbances a system can absorb. For each type of disturbance, the system must contain some counteracting response. . . . The law of requisite variety provides an insight into well-functioning complex systems. The diversity of potential responses must be sufficient to handle the diversity of disturbances. If disturbances become more diverse, then so must the possible responses. If not the system won’t hold together. (Page, 2011, p. 204, 211)

What are the ways these insights can be applied to strategies that enable the center to hold? In order to promote diversity of ideas and perspectives, a leader such as Abraham Lincoln must value variability within the system (cabinet) they are leading. Variability, in turn, challenges the center of any system. Variability requires that the leaders and other members of the system tolerate increased ambiguity, effectively manage conflict, and provide safe settings in which alternative ideas can be explored. Therefore, leaders such as Lincoln must identify strategies that enable members of their organization live with ambiguity, work with conflict and provide safe places for idea exploration.

### **Emancipation Proclamation as a Divisive yet Innovative Move**

There is no better example of this search for a center that can hold in the midst of diverse perspective than in Lincoln’s drafting of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln was struggling with his own evolving perspective(s) regarding slavery and the ultimate purpose(s) of the civil war—influenced, in part, by his multiple conversations with Frederick Douglass (further evidence of Lincoln’s openness to alternative perspective). He was not alone. Members of his cabinet were wrapped up in their own internal conflicts and conflict with one another regarding slavery. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 462) offers the following account:

Within the cabinet as well as on Capitol Hill, the rancor over slavery infected every discourse. The debates had grown "so bitter," according to Seward, that personal and even official relationships among members were ruptured, leading to "a prolonged discontinuance of Cabinet meetings." Though Tuesdays and Fridays were still designated for sessions, each secretary remained in his department unless a messenger arrived to confirm that a meeting

would be held. Seward recalled that when these general discussions were still taking place, Lincoln had listened intently but had not taken "an active part in them." For Lincoln, the problem of slavery was not an abstract issue. While he concurred with the most passionate abolitionists that slavery was "a moral, a social and a political wrong," as president, he could not ignore the constitutional protection of the institution where it already existed.

There was no occasion during Lincoln's presidency when VUCA-Plus was more evident than during this divisive deliberation regarding slavery.

In the midst of this state of bitter disagreement among cabinet members, Lincoln himself had come to a decision regarding slavery that diverged from his previous position (evidence of Lincoln's openness to divergent perspectives) yet was based values that centered Lincoln's ultimate decision (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, p. 363):

Lincoln revealed his preliminary thinking to Seward and Welles in the early hours of Sunday, July 13, as they rode together in the president's carriage to the funeral of Stanton's infant son. . . . During the journey . . .the president informed them that he was considering "emancipating the slaves by proclamation in case the Rebels did not cease to persist in their war." He said that he had "dwelt earnestly on the gravity, importance, and delicacy" of the subject and had "come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Thus, the constitutional protection of slavery could and would be overridden by the constitutionally sanctioned war powers of the president.

This was, Welles clearly recognized, "a new departure for the President, for until this time, in all our previous interviews ... he had been prompt and emphatic in denouncing any interference by the General Government with the subject." The normally talkative Seward said merely that the "subject involved consequences so vast and momentous that he should wish to bestow on it mature reflection before giving a decisive answer," though he was inclined to think it "justifiable."

The stage was now set for Lincoln to bring his decision regarding emancipation to his conflict-ridden cabinet (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, pp. 463-464)

[An historical] session was likely held in Lincoln's office, as depicted in Francis Carpenter's famous painting, First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. . . . Lincoln took the floor and announced he had called them together in order to read the preliminary draft of an emancipation proclamation. He understood the "differences in the Cabinet on the slavery question" and welcomed their suggestions after they heard what he had to say; but he wanted them to know that he "had resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice." Then, removing two foolscap sheets from his pocket and adjusting his glasses on his nose, he began to read what amounted to a legal brief for emancipation based on the chief executive's powers as commander in chief. His draft proclamation set January 1, 1863, little more than five months away, as the date on which all slaves within states still in rebellion



against the Union would be declared free, "thenceforward, and forever." It required no cumbersome enforcement proceedings.

This was truly an "innovative" move – a mutation that would change everything. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 464-465) continues:

Though it did not cover the roughly 425,000 slaves in the loyal border states--where, without the use of his war powers, no constitutional authority justified his action--the proclamation was shocking in scope. In a single stroke, it superseded legislation on slavery and property rights that had guided policy in eleven states for nearly three quarters of a century. Three and a half million blacks who had lived enslaved for generations were promised freedom. It was a daring move, Welles later said, "fraught with consequences, immediate and remote, such as human foresight could not penetrate."

Most mutations fall to the wayside. They are inappropriate, "ahead-of-their-time," or simply "not a good time." A few mutations, however, are appropriate, timely and of great value in solving a VUCA-Plus type issue. Such was the case with the Emancipation Proclamation.

### **Mutations and Collective Intelligence**

How did Lincoln and his cabinet translate this mutation into a valuable innovation? Even more basically, what does a group of people (in this case a presidential cabinet) do when confronted with a mutation. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 465) offers the following description:

The cabinet listened in silence. With the exception of Seward and Welles, to whom the president had intimated his intentions the previous week, the members were startled by the boldness of Lincoln's proclamation. Only Stanton and, surprisingly, Bates declared themselves in favor of "its immediate promulgation." Stanton instantly grasped the military value of the proclamation. Having spent more time than any of his colleague contemplating the logistical problems facing the army, he understood the tremendous advantage to be gained if the massive workforce of slaves could be transferred from the Confederacy to the Union. Equally important, he had developed a passionate belief in the justice of emancipation.

Offering an expanded perspective on the benefits inherent in Lincoln's pronouncement, Stanton had increased the collective intelligence of Lincoln's cabinet. Bates further expanded the intelligence, offering support from a conservative perspective. His support was based not just on the strategic rationale offered by Stanton, but also the more emotional connections he made regarding the proclamation and his own family's hardships.

Once again, collective intelligence is best based on both thought and feeling. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 465) provides the following narrative regarding Bates' contribution:

Bates, as one of the more conservative members of the cabinet, surprised his colleagues with his enthusiastic approval of the proclamation. He had previously registered disapproval of the more limited emancipation measures attempted by the military and had expressed grave misgivings about the confiscation legislation. His sudden support of this far more radical step

can be traced, in part, to the terrible division that slavery and the war had wrought upon his family.

This manifestation of collective intelligence did not immediately change entrenched opinions. It rarely does (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, p. 466-468):

The division of sentiment within the cabinet was manifest as Blair, Chase, and Seward spoke. Arriving late, after Lincoln's announcement that he had already resolved to issue the proclamation, Blair spoke up vigorously in opposition and asked to file his objections. While he supported the idea of compensated, gradual emancipation linked to colonization, he feared that the president's radical proclamation would cause such an outcry among conservatives and Democrats that Republicans would lose the fall elections. More important, it would "put in jeopardy the patriotic element in the border States, already severely tried," and "would, as soon as it reached them, be likely to carry over those States to the secessionists." Lincoln replied that while he had considered these dangers, he had tried for months to get the border states "to move in this matter, convinced in his own mind that it was their true interest to do so, but his labors were in vain." The time had come to move ahead. He would, however, willingly let Blair file his written objections.

. . . Seward had little faith in the efficacy of proclamations that he considered nothing more than paper without the muscle of the advancing Union Army to enforce them. "The public mind seizes quickly upon theoretical schemes for relief," he pointedly told Frances, who had long yearned for a presidential proclamation against slavery, "but is slow in the adoption of the practical means necessary to give them effect." Seward's position, in fact, was nearly identical to that held by Chase. His preference, he said, "would have been to confiscate all rebel property, including slaves, as fast as the territory was conquered." Only an immediate military presence could assure escaped slaves of protection. Yet Seward's practical focus underestimated the proclamation's power to unleash the moral fervor of the North and keep the Republican Party united by making freedom for the slaves an avowed objective of the war.

Here is where Lincoln's gift of building loyalty and alliances despite fundamental differences of perspective and value (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, p. 468):

Despite his concerns about the effect of the proclamation, Seward had no thought of opposing it. Once Lincoln had made up his mind, Seward was steadfast in his loyalty to him. He demurred only on the issue of timing. "Mr. President," he said, "I approve of the proclamation, but I question the expediency of its issue at this juncture. The depression of the public mind, consequent upon our repeated reverses, is so great that I fear it may be viewed as the last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help . . . our last shriek, on the retreat." Better to wait, he grandiloquently suggested, "until the eagle of victory takes his flight," and buoyed by military success, "hang your proclamation about his neck."

We witness one element of Lincoln's gift for sustaining relationships midst differences in his appreciation for contributions made by others (Kearns Goodwin, 2005, p. 468)

The wisdom of the view of the Secretary of State struck me with very great force," Lincoln later told the artist Francis Carpenter. "It was an aspect of the case that, in all my thought upon the subject, I had entirely overlooked. The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory."

In this instance, Lincoln could not only appreciate diverse (mutating) contributions made by a member of his cabinet, but also rework his strategy based on this contribution. Lincoln's own set regarding timing of the proclamation was challenged and subsequently reset. Lincoln could value and act on differences. A mutation was turned into a society-changing innovation as a result of Lincoln's skillful management of diversity.

### **Breaking the Set**

One of the major challenges in retaining the center of any system such as a Presidential cabinet (or classical music framework) is that of challenging basic assumption and frames of reference while also reaffirming the fundamental intentions of the system. Children do this through sometime remarkable—it is called "play." They can pretend and try out something without violating the rules and norms of the "real" world. We find that same thing occurring among dogs who are playfully fighting with one another, and among many young mammals who are enacting courtship rituals prior to actually seeking out a mate (which is not unlike the traditional square dances in North America that allowed young men and women to "court" one another in a safe and playful round of dances.).

### **Morphological Analysis and the Medici Effect**

I find that I can effectively introduce this element of play in my own work with organizations of many kinds—be they educational, governmental, security-based or human service-based. I have created a process called "morphological analysis" that encourages a program design team to "play" with alternative scenarios regarding a wide variety of parameters—such as the population being served, length of the program being offered, and location of the program delivery. We can design a program for 1 person that lasts five years and is totally digital, or a program for 1,000 people, provided for 5 minutes and offered in a National Park. Take your pick. The important point is that planning for this program enables a team to break their established set in a playful manner. Thus, they can come in with a looser framework when they sit down for "serious" deliberations regarding the envisioned programs—and might even incorporate some of the ideas generated in the morphological sessions (maybe a session or two that emanates digitally from a national park . . . ).

Frans Johansson (2004, p. 59) offers a similar approach in suggesting ways to bring about the Medici Effect:

Apply the idea to someone or something else: Imagine that you are designing a beach house. What would it look like? Now assume that you are designing that house for Pablo Picasso- how would that change the design? Forget that you have no idea of what he actually wanted, but work from your perception of who Picasso was as a person. Then suppose you were designing the house for opera singer Luciano Pavarotti. What would happen to the size of the rooms, the curvature of the valves? The ideas you would get from these types of explo-rations could evolve

into something interesting and unique when combined with your standard way of thinking about such a project.

Create constraints: When a yoga teacher broke her arm, she was not sure if she could continue teaching while it healed. She soon found, though, that without the use of her arm, she naturally resorted to new and inventive methods for both understanding her own body and teaching yoga. By creating constraints, by accident or on purpose, we may be pushed to explore alternative ways to solve a given problem. Say that you are trying to innovate your in-store customer service operation. What happens if you assume that the customer service personnel can't speak? Or can't use their hands? By creating constraints, you may break down the barriers and think of ideas that would never have occurred to you otherwise.

For both the architect and yoga teacher, the set has been broken without either of them abandoning their core focus and mission. They have broken barriers while not forgetting what is at the heart of their work. The center holds while diversity of ideas abounds.

### **The Balancing Act**

We witness this balancing act between diversity and an enduring center in the way Abraham Lincoln managed his presidency. He remained open to new ideas and a variety of opinions offered by members of his cabinet (and many other people) while holding true to his fundamental values and commitment to preserving the union of his country. This balancing act was not always appreciated by those with whom we worked. As Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 675) notes:

. . . by the end of his tenure as Attorney General, Bates had formed a more spacious understanding of the president's unique leadership style. . . . "Mr. Lincoln," Bates told Francis Carpenter, "comes very near being a perfect man, according to my ideal of manhood. He lacks but one thing ... the element of will. I have sometimes told him, for instance, that he was unfit to be intrusted with the pardoning power. Why, if a man comes to him with a touching story, his judgment is almost certain to be affected by it. Should the applicant be a woman, a wife, a mother, or a sister, in nine cases out of ten, her tears, if nothing else, are sure to prevail."

Bates could appreciate Lincoln's generosity and caring attitude but felt that it got in the way of his president's ability to make hard decisions. What Bates failed to see was the application of Lincoln's willingness to hear all sides before making a decision based on his core values. There was also a failure on Bates' part to appreciate the value of engaging both thoughts and feelings when making decisions in a complex setting. Tears are just as important as cogent reasoning—especially when they reveal diverse perspectives on a specific issue and are evident in people (women) who are often marginalized.

### **Hierarchy and Flocking**

Those who study complex systems have offered a startling observation: the more complex a condition being faced by any organization, community or nation, the less appropriate it is for this system to operate in a hierarchical manner. While this observation was made quite a few years ago (Waldrop, 1992) it has held true in most instances—especially regarding complex, adaptive systems (Miller and

Page, 2007). There are few other propositions that are as radical regarding the successful operations of a system then this one.

Originating in many instances from the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, the case made for the viability of nonhierarchical systems arises in the study of many biological systems that operate in a nonhierarchical manner. In fact, we find that most biological systems are non-hierarchical. They range from the biological webs that operate in forests (to which I will turn later in this essay) to the hives of bees and packs of wolves. It is only the human being and a few other primates that prefer hierarchies with some members of a tribe or pack exerting authority over other members.

When an environment is complex (with many elements being not only present but also interwoven with all other elements) than many options are available. Many paths can be taken. Under such conditions we are likely to be confused, in a frenzy, undirected. We can illustrate this state by turning to the flocking of birds. Birds tend to flock because predators find it hard to focus on any one bird in the flock. The same reason exists for the schooling of fish.

Let's take the perspective of a hawk or shark. He is swooping in on the flock of birds or school of fish. However, there are so many options for a hawk or shark to grab that he loses focus and can't home in on any one bird or fish. The hawk swoops through the entire flock and catches none of them. His only hope is that there will be a bird flying independent of the flock on which he can focus. The shark charges through the school and finds himself with none of the fish in his jaws. The shark is only successful when there is a single fish (or person swimming alone at night—as in "Jaws").

Not only do birds flock and fish swim in schools, the challenges we face as human beings also often come to us as swarming messes (a term I use to describe problems with many layers that are often shifting). More precisely, challenges that are fluid in nature can often be difficult to address. Like the Hawk or Shark, we find it hard to concentrate on issues that contain VUCA-Plus properties. Turbulence in particular reigns supreme—and we must adapt or fall victim to the swirling confusion. We become Hawks who fail to achieve anything and Sharks who remain hungry.

It is only when there are multiple players coming from multiple perspectives that the predator can be successful. Female lions hunt in packs, surrounding a herd of antelope and then quite gracefully attacking in unison from all directions, finding a single antelope to wound and then kill. While the male lion sits on the sidelines, waiting for the occasional big challenge mounted by some other male lion, the female lions have exhibited collaborative planning and execution. Do we find something similar operating in the Lincoln cabinet. Are diverse perspectives being safely entertained as plans are made and enacted in the war being mounted against the Confederacy?

## **Group Intelligence**

At the very least we know that groups can often do better than single operating individuals in solving problems – even when there is one particularly gifted member of the group. A smart female lion is always to be welcomed—but not if she tries to disrupt the coordinated planning of her female colleagues. Applied to human being, we know from research on something called "collective intelligence" that when groups of people work together in any effective manner, they create intelligence

that cannot exist on an individual level (Malone, 2004). While Lincoln might have been a gifted speaker, compelling visionary or even fairly smart military strategist, he certainly didn't have all of the "smarts" needed to conduct business in a complex political environment with many interwoven parts.

### **Looking for Assistance**

From the very first (when drafting his first inaugural address), Lincoln looked for expertise among those he had appointed to his cabinet. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 326) notes Secretary Seward's contributions to Lincoln's drafting of this address:

Seward's greatest contribution to the tone and substance of the inaugural address was in its conclusion. Lincoln's finale threw down the gauntlet to the South: "With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of 'Shall it be peace, or a sword?' " Seward recommended a very different closing, designed "to meet and remove prejudice and passion in the South, and despondency and fear in the East. Some words of affection--some of calm and cheerful confidence." He suggested two alternate endings. Lincoln drew upon Seward's language to create his immortal coda.

Seward suggested: "I close. We are not we must not be aliens or enemies but fellow countrymen and brethren. Although passion has strained our bonds of affection too hardly they must not, I am sure they will not be broken. The mystic chords which proceeding from so many battle fields and so many patriot graves pass through all the hearts and all the hearths in this broad continent of ours will yet again harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angel of the nation."

Lincoln proceeded to recast and sharpen Seward's patriotic sentiments into a concise and powerful poetry: "I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better an- gels of our nature." Most significant, Seward's "guardian angel" breathes down on the nation from above; Lincoln's "better angels" are inherent in our nature as a people.

We thus see the influence of Seward not only on the timing of Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation, but also on his initial address to the nation having been elected president. I would note that Lincoln's comment that "we are not enemies, but friends" applied to not just his Southern combatants but also members of his cabinet – his team of rivals.

In his acknowledge of intelligence that comes from other sources, Lincoln also looked for expertise in areas that were not those in which he was knowledgeable. Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 365) offers the following example regarding Lincoln's reliance on the financial expertise of Salmon Chase, his Secretary of the Treasury:

Lincoln looked to Chase for guidance on the complex problem of financing a war at a time when the government was heavily in debt. The economic Panic of 1857, corruption in the Buchanan administration, and the partial dismemberment of the Union had taken a massive toll on the government coffers. With Congress not in session to authorize new tariffs and taxes, Chase was forced to rely on government loans to sustain war expenditures. Banks held back at first, demanding higher interest rates than the government could afford to pay, but eventually, Chase cobbled together enough revenue to meet expenses until Congress convened.

Chase later noted proudly that in the early days of the war, Lincoln relied on him to carry out functions that ordinarily belonged to the War Department.

While these examples relate to Lincoln openness to advise from and reliance on expertise from members of his cabinet, Kearns Goodwin (2005, pp.491-492) offers many examples of the hearty and often heated debates that took place during frequent cabinet meetings.

### **Hearty and Heated Debate**

I offer one excerpt from her account. It concerns a highly contentious cabinet meeting regarding the removal of Secretary Stanton from his office. This meeting was attended not only by members of Lincoln's cabinet but also a "Committee of Nine" (senators who came to the meeting with a resolution to remove Stanton from his post):

. . . Lincoln proposed a joint session later that evening with cabinet and the Committee of Nine. . . . Lincoln began the unusual session by reading the resolutions of the senators and inviting a candid discussion of the issues raised. . . [Lincoln defended] Seward against the committee's charge. . . The senators renewed their demand that "the whole Cabinet" must "consider and decide great questions," with no one individual directing the "whole Executive action." They noted with approval that John Quincy Adams adhered to the majority vote of his cabinet even when he disagreed with them.

. . . Blair followed with a long argument that "sustained the President and dissented most decidedly from the idea of a plural Executive." Though he "had differed much with Mr. Seward," he nonetheless "believed him as earnest as any one in the war; though it would be injurious to the public service to have him leave the Cabinet, and that the Senate had better not meddle with matters of that kind." Bates expressed wholehearted agreement with Blair. . . .

After nearly five hours of open conversation, sensing he was making headway, Lincoln asked each of the senators if he still desired to see Seward resign his position. Though four . . . reaffirmed their original position, the others had changed their minds. When the meeting adjourned at 1 a.m., the senators suspected that no change in the cabinet would be made.

It was during this meeting and other held about the performance of Secretary Seward that fuller understanding emerged regarding the complex nature of failures occurring in the waging of war against the Confederacy. In seeking to blame everything on Seward, those advocating his dismissal were ignoring this broader analysis. Collective intelligence prevailed. Seward remained in office and a more

thoughtful and constructive conversation took place—leading to some important changes in the Union’s war strategy.

### **Empowerment and Emotional Intelligence**

Keys to the creation of collective intelligence align with what I have identified elsewhere as the empowerment pyramid (Bergquist, 2003). Clear and open communication, effective processes for managing conflicts that emerge from differences, both divergent and convergent problem-solving processes, and consensus-based modes of decision-making must be in place. In recent years, with opportunities and fears arising from the Artificial Intelligence revolution in place, we might find collective intelligence to be offering even greater potential if it is coupled with the intelligence generated from the machines. (Malone, 2019).

There is one additional point to be made. We know that for collective intelligence to be successfully engaged, the team members must enjoin emotional intelligence (EI). Hughes and Terrell (2007) propose that EI enhances collective intelligence and team performance. They identify the need for a team to have a sense of purpose, acceptance of one another, perception that the team is a distinct entity, shared commitment, shared pride, clarity about roles and responsibilities and resilience.

Collective skills related to these ingredients include forming team identity, finding appropriate motivation, emotional awareness, interpersonal communication, tolerance of differing views, resolution of conflicts, and creation of a positive mood—dynamics that often seem to be operating in Lincoln’s cabinet. We find innovation, learning and profound intelligence when these ingredients are added to those required of empowerment.

### **Collaboration and Truth**

There is one final element I wish to introduce when seeking to determine how Abraham Lincoln could be successful in forming and sustaining productive relationships in the midst of differing views and values. This element is introduced by Ken and Mary Gergen (2004) who proclaimed that “truth is only found within community.” More specifically, they would suggest that truth is found in trusting relationships: “constructivism favors a replacement of the individual as the source of meaning with the relationship.” Even more to the point, truth is found in dialogue – and disagreement.

There is an insistence that we respect and learn from other people: “one is invited into a posture of curiosity and respect for others.” I think that Abraham Lincoln would have noted in agreement with this statement. Of greatest importance for Ken and Mary Gergen is the respect we show for the distinctive expertise which people from all backgrounds bring to the dynamic construction of a desirable future. According to Ken Gergen (2004), a constructivist framework:

is . . . likely to favor forms of dialogue out of which new realities and values might emerge. The challenge is not to locate “the one best way.” But to create the kinds of relationships in which we can collaboratively build our future.

We are not confined to traditional sources of expertise in such a setting because the relationship and the discourse is itself reality and the primary source of expertise. From the perspective of Ken and Mary



Gergen, it is a matter of not just sustaining the relationship in the midst of differences, it is a matter of recognizing that the differences themselves enhance the relationship and enable those engaged in the relationship to come to a sense of shared truth through constructive dialogue.

## Conclusions

Faced with the challenges of VUCA-Plus either as a mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century leader or as the leader of an organization, community or nation in a mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century setting, the role played by constructive dialogue in the midst of diversity might be critical. Abraham Lincoln and Doris Kearns Goodman seem to think so. It is in this constructive dialogue among rivals that Lincoln finds a blending of his two fundamental dreams regarding relationships and achievement.

Lincoln's desire to receive the esteem of his fellow men (stated as a 23 year old) is wedded with his commitment to preserve a nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (stated as president). As Kearns Goodwin (2005, p. 749) declared, Abraham Lincoln truly belongs to the ages and is not only to be revered not only as a leader, but also as a teacher of ways in which to retain relationships in the midst of differences.

---

## References

Bergquist, William (2003) *Creating the Appreciative Organization*. Harpswell, Maine: Pacific Sounds Press.

Bergquist, William (2020) "Leadership and Anxiety: Containment and Metabolism I: Anxiety in a VUCA Plus Environment. *Library of Professional Psychology*. <https://psychology.edu/library/leadership-and-anxiety-containment-and-metabolism-i-anxiety-in-a-vuca-plus-environment/>

Gergen, Kenneth (2000) *The Saturated Self*. (Rev.Ed.) New York: Basic Books.

Gergen, Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2004) *Social Construction: Entering the Dialogue*. Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.

Hughes, Marcia and James Bradford Terrell (2007) *The Emotional Intelligent Team*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Johansson, Franz (2004) *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts and Cultures*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kearns Goodwin, Doris (2005) *Team of Rivals*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Malone, Thomas (2004) *The Future of Work: How the New Order of Business Will Shape Your Organization, Your Management Style and Your Life*, Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Malone, Thomas (2019) *Superminds: The Surprising Power of People and Computers Thinking Together*. New York: Little Brown Spark.

Miller, John and Scott Page (2007) Complex Adaptive Systems. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Page, Scott (2011) Diversity and Complexity. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Waldrop, M. Michael (1992) Complexity, New York: Simon and Schuster.