



## When History Repeats Itself: Historical Perspective on Leadership Development

**W**ar: It has become a popular metaphor for today's business world. Globalization, hostile takeovers, competition on all fronts. Instead of cannons, companies are deploying computer networks, broadband and e-commerce to assail their opponents. Defensive tactics may require negotiating strategic alliances, offshoring the troops, or blitzing the Internet with ads.

Growing numbers of writers and educators are basing their leadership lessons for corporate executives on examples set by some of history's greatest war-time leaders. Scan lists of popular business books and you will find titles like *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* by Donald Phillips, *Churchill on Leadership: Executive Success in the Face of Adversity* by Steven Hayward and *Eisenhower on Leadership: Ike's Enduring Lessons in Total Victory Management* by Alan Axelrod.

In addition to the easily grasped analogy of business to war, there is another reason for the popularity of these books: they focus on well-known historical figures and real life, do-or-die examples of leadership at its finest.

While the use of historical analogy as a teaching tool is not a new phenomenon—witness Wess Roberts' 1985 bestseller *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*—what is new is the proliferation of the concept.

More and more front-line educators are embracing what behaviorists and educational researchers have known for some time: tangible examples of an abstract concept, particularly those that trigger an emotional response in an audience (like historical events), are a powerful way to demonstrate a point. These real-life stories drive home the key concepts and ensure that the message stays with the audience over time.

### HISTORY & LEADERSHIP: A BESTSELLERS LIST

*Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* by Donald Phillips

*Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy: The Timeless Lessons of History's Greatest Empire Builder* by Partha Bose

*George C. Marshall: The Rubrics of Leadership* by Steward Husted

*Churchill on Leadership: Executive Success in the Face of Adversity* by Steven Hayward

*Leadership Lessons from the Civil War: Winning Strategies for Today's Managers* by Tom Wheeler

*Eisenhower on Leadership: Ike's Enduring Lessons in Total Victory Management* by Alan Axelrod

*Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition* by Dennis Perkins

*Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Bully Pulpit* by James Strock

*Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way* by Robin Gerber

*The Genius of Sitting Bull: 13 Heroic Strategies for Today's Business Leaders* by Emmett Murphy

*The Leadership Moment: Nine True Stories of Triumph and Disaster and Their Lessons for Us All* by Michael Useem

*The Way of the Warrior: Business Tactics and Techniques from History's Twelve Greatest Generals* by James Dunnigan and Daniel Masterson

*Into the Unknown: Leadership Lessons from Lewis and Clark's Daring Westward Expedition* by Jack Uldrich



## *Leadership Lessons from History*

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### **Role Models from History**

For more than 20 years, Tigrett Corp., a Gettysburg, PA-based firm, has delivered its *Leadership Lessons from History* workshops to organizations such as General Mills, Rite-Aid, the Federal Judicial Center, DIA's Center for Leadership, and Hoffmann-La Roche. The two, three and seven-day workshops focus on a range of historical leaders, including Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lewis & Clark, Sitting Bull, Frederick Douglass, Clara Barton and others.



Winston Churchill and  
Dwight D. Eisenhower

The workshops use a range of presenters, teaching styles, multimedia and site visits to engage attendees, promote active participation and encourage commitment to post-workshop on-the-job action. Themes include effective communication, leading organizational change, managing conflict, building strategic alliances, visionary leadership, leading through influence and motivating your team to extraordinary performance.

“Although abstract leadership skills can be difficult to teach,” notes Everett Ladd, Tigrett Corp. president, “we have found historical parallels to most contemporary workplace challenges, and colorful role model to inspire us.”

In fact, the annals of history boast an endless supply of visionary leaders, gripping events, and epic story lines. Got a sticky merger to deal with? Alexander the Great dealt with scores of them as he enlarged his empire to include most of the known world.

Finding it difficult to motivate your employees in the face of budget cuts or lack of equipment? Winston Churchill motivated an entire nation to do more with less while building a coalition that stopped the Nazi war machine at the English Channel.

Think you have it tough holding together a crumbling department, division or company? Abraham Lincoln, elected president in 1860 with only 40% of the popular vote, watched helplessly as six states seceded from the Union before he even took office. Five more left soon after his inauguration, forming a rival organization—the Confederate States of America. Then, barely four weeks into his term, the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter, touching off the Civil War. Lincoln's cabinet was stocked with strong-willed, talented people who were convinced they would make a better President (three of them were rival candidates for the Republican nomination), and to top it off, the members of this dysfunctional “executive board” disliked each other even more than they disdained Lincoln.

So how did Lincoln manage to hold things together and re-unite the nation? He energetically articulated his vision—saving the Union—making it clear to all who would listen, and he communicated it continuously, until there was no doubt of his purpose. A master in dealing with difficult people, Lincoln also managed the infighting within his cabinet. (Note: For an excellent analysis of the key personalities in Lincoln's cabinet, see Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.)



### **Civil War Leadership**

Times of trouble often spawn great leaders, and the Civil War was no exception. As a result, this period has become fertile ground for educators seeking to harvest exemplary leadership lessons.

As part of its *Lessons from Lincoln* workshop, Tigrett Corp. takes participants to Gettysburg, not only to see the site of Lincoln's stirring Gettysburg Address, but to walk the fields where the largest battle on U.S. soil took place. Over three days in 1863, 160,000 men fought here, causing 50,000 casualties. With a licensed battlefield guide, participants tour the spots where Union officers John Buford, George Greene and Joshua L. Chamberlain made critical defensive stands. Workshop attendees see the open field across which Confederate George Pickett led his ill-fated charge at the behest of his commander, Robert E. Lee. Participants analyze and discuss the strategy, communication, and leadership lessons to be learned from these events. According to Tigrett Academic Director Antigoni Ladd, "The impact of these stories and the lessons they teach us are magnified a hundred times by actually being on-site where it all took place."

Another educator who believes that Gettysburg is well worth the trip is Professor Michael Useem, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management. As part of his MBA and executive education programs, Useem takes students to Gettysburg for a first-hand grounding in leadership and management history. In his courses, as well as his book, *The Leadership Moment: Nine True Stories of Triumph and Disaster and Their Lessons for Us All*, Useem takes time to focus on one of Gettysburg's greatest heroes: Union Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.<sup>1</sup>



Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

As commander of the 20th Maine regiment, Chamberlain was assigned 120 deserters from another unit and was told to press them into service or, if they refused to fight, to have them shot. Chamberlain chose to treat these men (one-third as many as his depleted regiment) with dignity, not contempt. Gaining their trust through his thoughtful listening, supplying their basic needs, and appealing to their patriotism, he convinced them to join his unit, which was assigned to hold a strategic hill, Little Round Top, in the face of an overwhelming Confederate assault. The 20th Maine troops stood firm and saved the Union line from being flanked. Today's leaders similarly need to continue listening to their employees, treating them with respect, and reminding them of the higher purpose of their work, in order to build commitment.

Looking beyond Gettysburg, Tom Wheeler's book, *Leadership Lessons from the Civil War: Winning Strategies for Today's Managers*, uses historical events to draw similar parallels between the battlefield and the boardroom, focusing on the strategies of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and former Coca-Cola CEO Roberto Goizueta; Union General Ulysses S. Grant and former Time Warner CEO Jerry Levin; and, in a pair of cautionary tales, General Robert E. Lee and Netscape founder James Barksdale.<sup>3</sup>



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### **Leadership & Management: Defining the Terms**

Although the terms “management” and “leadership” are often used interchangeably, many educators believe there is a distinct difference between the two. Executives must understand the distinction, particularly today when many organizations are thought to be underled and overmanaged.

A definition from the mid-1980s, still commonly heard today, was originally advanced by leadership guru Warren Bennis and co-author Burt Nanus in their book *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*: “Managers are people who do things right, and leaders are people who do the right thing.”<sup>4</sup>

John Kotter, professor of leadership, emeritus at Harvard Business School and an established voice on leadership and change, maintains a similar view. In his book, *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management*, Kotter states, “Leadership...does not produce consistency and order...it produces movement.” Movement, in this context, means change, and Kotter believes that successful business leaders achieve organizational change through three key processes: establishing direction; aligning people; motivating and inspiring.<sup>5</sup>

### **Leadership in World War II**

A leader who fully embodied these traits is Winston Churchill, who, through his vision, determination and motivating spirit during some of the darkest days of World War II, was able to create and maintain the coalition of Allies that eventually broke the back of the Axis powers.

In 1940, when Churchill took office as Prime Minister, Hitler appeared unstoppable, Japan was expanding unchecked in the far east, and yet the world was still filled with neutral countries (including the United States). But by war’s end, there were only nine sovereign states in the world that had not taken sides, and nearly all had aligned against the fascists.<sup>6</sup>



Winston Churchill

“Perhaps one of Churchill’s most interesting leadership traits was his ability to build coalitions,” says Antigoni Ladd of Tigrett Corp., which for several years has offered its *Called to Lead: Lessons from Eisenhower & Churchill* workshop. “The challenge was getting such strong egos as Stalin, Roosevelt and even Charles de Gaulle involved in working with the British. Churchill used charm, alternating with toughness, followed by more persuasion, until he wore people down. His approach was hard, hard work, coupled with personality and persuasion.”

Dr. Christopher Harmon, of the Marine Corps University, credits Churchill with another critical leadership trait: giving the world a vision that was not only political, but moral. “The vision was that of the democracies standing up against better armed tyrannies and prevailing with moral force until such time as they could win with material force.”<sup>7</sup>

“I was not the lion,” Churchill famously declared after the war, “but it fell to me to give the lion’s roar.”



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### **Leadership in the Workplace**

Although leadership is sometimes viewed as the responsibility of the CEO, many of today's educators (and some significant companies) feel that leadership is so important that it must be learned and practiced throughout the organization.

“To truly succeed in a turbulent world, more than half the workforce needs to step up to the plate in some arena and provide change leadership,” Harvard's John Kotter says. “Most of this leadership will be modest. It might be a young sales rep who makes the company see a critical new opportunity, or a summer intern who helps put together a vivid demonstration of a problem. It is the sum of all these heroic actions—large and small—that enables organizations to change in significant ways.”<sup>8</sup>

In their *MIT Sloan Management Review* article “Developing Leaders: How Winning Companies Keep on Winning,” Robert Fulmer, Philip Gibbs, and Marshall Goldsmith say that educational programs that focus on developing future leaders are increasingly being recognized by corporate America as a source of competitive advantage. Some companies, like General Electric and Johnson & Johnson, consider leadership development so important that they have made it an integral part of their operations.

The authors quote Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, who once described the company's Leadership Development Institute, as a “staging ground for corporate revolutions,” and they note that several innovative ideas, such as the Six Sigma quality-improvement program and GE's expansion into emerging economies, have come from presentations made at leadership development events.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Learning Process: Using Stories, Not Data**

Using history to teach important leadership concepts such as strategic thinking, problem solving, effective communication and team building can make these concepts not only much more accessible and comprehensible, but also interesting, relevant and memorable.

As management guru Tom Peters points out in his book, *A Passion for Excellence*, “human beings reason largely by means of stories, not by mounds of data.”<sup>10</sup> Roger Schank, founder of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University and author of *Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory*, notes that, “Stories illustrate points better than simply stating the points themselves because, if the story is good enough, you usually don't have to state your point at all; the hearer thinks about what you have said and figures out the point independently.”<sup>11</sup>

Stories that illustrate a particular lesson also tend to stay in our memories much longer than an abstract concept or list of facts. According to Peg Neuhauser, author of *Corporate Legends and Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*, stories create images in the mind which are stored in memory more directly and easily than hard data. Stories also tend to make the information being presented more believable, which is why advertisers often design their ads around a story. For these reasons, Neuhauser calls stories, “the single most powerful form of human communication.”<sup>12</sup>

The use of stories and historical events to teach leadership concepts is tied to another important element of learning: emotion. At the workshop level, Antigoni Ladd of Tigrett Corp. notes that, “The emotive impact of a lesson that focuses on historical figures and events is usually much greater than a



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theory-based course or one based on fictional company case studies—because history is so much more tangible. You can easily see it, touch it, read it, and even picture yourself in the midst of it. It’s so powerful.”

From a comprehension perspective, James Zull, professor of biochemistry and director of the University Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education at Case Western Reserve University, notes that emotions are critical in determining how the brain accepts, processes and retains information. And while emotions do not appear to impact short-term memory, long-term memory, as well as reasoning, is strongly influenced by the emotion centers of the brain.<sup>13</sup>

While emotion plays an important role in learning, it also has a part to play in an effective leader’s implementation (and an organization’s acceptance) of change, according to Harvard Professor John Kotter:

“People change their behavior when they are motivated to do so, and that happens when you speak to their feelings. Nineteen logical reasons don’t necessarily do it. You need something, often visual, that helps produce the emotions that motivate people to move more than one inch to the left or one inch to the right. Great leaders are brilliant at this. They tell the kind of stories that create pictures in your mind and have emotional impact. Imagine, someone once told me, if Martin Luther King, Jr. had stood up there in front of the Lincoln Memorial and said, ‘I have a business strategy.’ King didn’t do that. He said, ‘I have a dream,’ and he *showed* us what his dream was, his *picture* of the future. You get people to change less by giving them an analysis that changes their thinking than by showing them something that affects their feelings.”<sup>14</sup>

### Active Learning & Memory Retention

Back in 1916, John Dewey, the celebrated educator, noted in his book *Democracy and Education*, that, “Education is not an affair of ‘telling,’ and being told, but an active, constructive process.”<sup>15</sup> Although the term had not yet been coined, what Dewey was talking about is “active learning”—a teaching method in which students do much more than passively listen to a lecturer. It involves students reading, writing, discussing, role playing or otherwise becoming engaged in problem-solving exercises. It also involves higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and it encourages students to extrapolate from their own experiences and apply what they have learned in the past to the new information being presented.<sup>16</sup> Essentially, it means moving students from passivity to activity as educators move from a teach-by-telling model to one involving much more teacher-student interaction.

As a proponent of active learning, Tigrett Corp. believes in taking its workshop participants directly to the historical source of its lessons, whenever possible. Gettysburg, PA; Billings, MT (near the Little Bighorn battlefield); Harpers Ferry, WV; even London, England, serve to intensify lessons learned from the leaders who worked or fought there.

For the *Lessons from Lincoln* workshop, a professional Lincoln interpreter, complete with stovepipe hat, is on-hand to deliver insights into the reasoning behind some of “his” more critical decisions.



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Mini case studies on members of Lincoln’s cabinet and prominent Union and Confederate officers are assigned to workshop teams, who analyze the cases and report their findings to the other teams. Participants are also asked to relate the relevance of these leaders’ actions to their own work environment and experiences.

Similarly, at the *Lessons from Little Bighorn* workshop, teams analyze the leadership styles of the Lakota warriors and the U.S. cavalry who met at this decisive battle. Participants visit the battlefield with a native-speaking Lakota guide, and view the battle from the perspectives of both the U.S. army and the Indians.

In the *Lessons from Lewis & Clark*, participants not only discuss team-building, they form teams and take up the challenge of whitewater rafting, where their safety may depend on clear communications, agreement on responsibilities, and understanding the risks involved.

Studies have shown that this kind of active learning results in a greater understanding of the material presented, longer-term recall of the lessons, and the development of greater problem-solving skills than traditional, passive learning. Research by IBM and the British Royal Post Office has shown that in an active learning environment in which individuals *experience* a lesson (in addition to being told and shown the lesson) the recall rate for the information increases dramatically versus a lesson plan that only involves information being orally or visually presented.<sup>17</sup>

LESSON PRESENTATION STYLE  
& COMPARATIVE RECALL RATE

	Told	Told & Shown	Told, Shown & Experienced
Recall After 3 Weeks	70%	72%	85%
Recall After 3 Months	10%	32%	65%

Source: Whitmore

Executives who have taken part in Tigrett Corp.’s leadership workshops seem to agree. A participant at one of the company’s *Lessons from Lewis & Clark* workshops commented that, “Being in the actual area that Lewis & Clark began their journey aided immensely in understanding the problems and leadership challenges they faced, and this in turn allowed me to make correlations to my own leadership challenges.”

A participant at one of the *Lessons from the Civil War* workshops noted that he “would like to see more training with history as a back-drop. I am more engaged and interested, plus, I can remember the material better.” A participant at one of Tigrett Corp.’s *Lessons from Lincoln* workshops said that, “The commentary and historical perspective about the war, Lincoln, etc. have been a wonderful gift to take away with me. It will be helpful to recall that Lincoln and the people of the day faced many of the same issues we do.”



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### Past as Prologue

In today's ultra-competitive business world, executives are pressured to deploy all the weapons in their arsenals to stay ahead of the opposition and win the day. So why not tap the wisdom and experience of some of history's greatest leaders? Though *they* may be long gone, their *achievements* still stand. In fact, history can be a relevant, inspiring and fun way for today's executives to gain valuable insight and direction.

As George Santayana, CEO, might say: Those who learn from the past are *not* condemned to repeat it –but the option is always there.

### End Notes and Bibliography

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