December 2011/January 2012 | Volume **69** | Number **4**
**The Resourceful School**

**Lincoln's Mission**

*Harvey Alvy and Pam Robbins*

**The Gettysburg Address provides important lessons for school leaders about holding fast to our values in tough times.**

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

—*Proverbs 29:18*

On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln became president of the United States. Thirty-nine days later, the U.S. Civil War began. Arguably, no U.S. president has had a rockier start or has guided the nation through a more difficult and turbulent time.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln's core values and beliefs shaped his actions. The path to success was certainly not easy: The war lasted for four terrible years. But ultimately, Lincoln's skill in defining and communicating his vision led to a victory that redefined the United States, which was reborn with a commitment to emancipation and a stronger union.

There's a lesson here for school leaders in tough times. Jim Collins (2005) reminds us that exceptional leaders are "ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work—*not themselves*—and they have the will to do whatever it takes (*whatever* it takes) to make good on that ambition" (p. 11). Like Lincoln, great school leaders are driven by an unwavering pursuit of their mission.

Lincoln's [Gettysburg Address](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp), delivered on November 19, 1863, eloquently articulated his vision for the nation. Analyzing Lincoln's words gives us the opportunity to consider how we, as educators, can define our core values to make better decisions and create more respectful and successful schools.

**Defining Core Beliefs**

For Lincoln, the mission was clear: *equality* ("the proposition that all men are created equal") and *preserving the Union* ("Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure"). His vision, which determined his actions, was equally clear: *Emancipation would create a transformed nation, rededicated to democratic values* ("that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom").

For both national and school leaders, clarity about core beliefs can ground us and help us handle times of crisis. As Bill George (2007) noted in his thoughtful study of leadership, *True North*,

It is under pressure—when your success, your career, or your life hangs in the balance—that you must decide what your values are. When you are forced to make trade-offs between your values under difficult circumstances, you learn what is most important in your life and what you are prepared to sacrifice for. Those who develop a clear sense of their values *before* they get into a crisis are better prepared to keep their bearings and navigate through difficult decisions and dilemmas when the pressure mounts. (p. 87)

Schools today are certainly "under pressure"; yet a strong sense of mission helps many of them rise to the challenge. We found an example of this kind of leadership in Henry County Public Schools, Virginia, where we talked with district administrators Patrice Newnam and DeWitt House. Once a booming furniture manufacturing center, the county saw factories close as jobs shifted overseas beginning in the late 1990s. As an economic crisis hit the community, schools reported dramatic increases in students living in poverty.

District leaders were committed to the vision that professional development, focused on differentiated instruction and professional learning communities (PLCs), could substantially increase the quality of student learning and boost the performance of schools serving low-income students. Embracing this vision, teacher leaders attended training, modeled differentiated instruction in their own classrooms, and engaged their colleagues in implementing those successful practices in their classrooms. Principals and leadership teams, committed to developing PLC infrastructures in their schools, did so with remarkable results. In almost every school, test scores improved. A belief in the district's mission and the commitment to that mission made a difference.

Often, leaders' reflections on the crucibles of their own lives are what spark their relentless commitment to action. In his study of great leaders, Howard Gardner (1995) concludes that "narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literary arsenal" (p. 43).

Shawn Clark, a middle school principal in Saluda, South Carolina, shared with us how her personal story inspires her sense of mission. Shawn knows every one of the 1,100 students in the school by name. She also knows about their interests, challenges, and successes. When she does walk-throughs, she knows what students are working on, participates in class discussions, and asks students to describe how today's lesson relates to the previous one and how they are doing in the class. When asked, "How can you know so much about every student?" she replies, "I must. You see, I was a high school dropout, not once, but twice. I vowed it would never happen to a student in my school."

Defining a personal vision requires that leaders set aside time to reflect on what really matters and explore how they can translate their values and feelings into a crystal-clear bottom line. The following questions can help with this process:

* What are the core values that underlie my resolve to do whatever it takes to advance the organization's purpose and to ensure that every individual within the organization thrives?
* What do we want to perpetuate in our schools, not merely for today but for the future?
* What do we want each of our children or children's children to experience here?
* Do our goals represent ideas of substance? How will our core values be used to prevent fads and quick fixes from becoming school and district initiatives?
* Will our goals make a difference for students?

**Connecting the Vision with Reality**

Lincoln's words at Gettysburg remind us that the noble work of leaders is about generating and sustaining hope every day: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

Administrators and teachers engage in "unfinished work" every day. We don't know for sure that our students will become successful adults. We don't know what the finished work will look like. But our beliefs and hope drive us to continually work on our vision. As Robert Evans (1995) reminds us, small wins aligned with core values sustain the long-term vision.

For example, a school leader who is committed to creating a culture of respect might welcome students as they enter school in the morning, thank a seasoned teacher for mentoring a new colleague, open a faculty meeting with kudos for a smooth first week of school, provide refreshments for teacher leaders involved in a peer-coaching workshop, make sure parent translators are available at meetings, and applaud teachers who empower students through portfolios and student-led conferences. Together, these day-to-day acts support the vision of a respectful school.

The leader also knows the importance of helping school staff members make the connection between lofty, long-term goals and the daily work they do. He or she will make sure that teachers recognize how seemingly minor actions, such as challenging a hurtful comment made in class or in a hallway, can send a powerful message. Random acts of kindness bring the vision to life and sustain energy for the work remaining to be done.

**The Importance of Character**

Although words are crucial to accomplishing organizational goals, words are not enough. Without worthy actions, words are hollow.

During the Civil War, many people in the North did not agree with some of Lincoln's policies or his deliberate nature, but nevertheless trusted him. Frederick Douglass commented on how millions of black Americans felt about the president: "They viewed him not in the light of separate individual acts, but in the light of his mission" (Burlingame, 2008).

Personal example is the most powerful tool that a leader holds to achieve success (Zenger & Folkman, 2002). Essential attributes of Lincoln's character—humility, perseverance, and a vision that extended beyond his immediate place and time—helped him inspire others to do what was right.

**Humility**

Turning again to the Gettysburg Address, we find a sentence of awe-inspiring humility: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here." Lincoln did not use the personal pronoun "I" once during the speech. It was about the larger goal, not about Abraham Lincoln.

Zenger and Folkman note in the *Extraordinary Leader* (2002) that "humility will make you approachable" (p. 234). This insight is crucial for school leaders. If principals or teacher leaders are perceived as unapproachable, they may never receive the feedback that is essential for both personal and organizational growth.

**Perseverance**

Lincoln stated, "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." Similarly, great school leaders must rededicate themselves to helping today's students overcome barriers and have "a new birth of freedom."

To persevere through tragedy is not easy. But we cannot let shortcomings keep us from our work. We need to learn from our challenges.

For example, it is easy for school leaders to become discouraged by unacceptably high dropout rates and seemingly intractable achievement gaps. Reduced school funding and the effects of poverty on achievement are challenges that may appear overwhelming. But in reality, these challenges also offer opportunities for school leaders to persevere, demonstrate resilience, and put into practice courageous solutions, so that the child whose parents dropped out of school can graduate and achieve the dreams that all parents have for their children.

**A Larger Vision**

Lincoln never traveled beyond the shores of the United States. Yet something in his character enabled him to see that the American democratic experiment—and the stain of slavery—had worldwide implications that extended into the future. In his annual message to Congress in December 1862, he affirmed,

Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. (Basler, 1953, p. 537)

Lincoln's closing phrase of the Gettysburg Address is memorable precisely because he saw an obligation beyond the shores of the United States, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." This universal message should inspire today's school leaders. A nation is great not because a few flagship schools or charter schools are thriving. A nation is great when *all* its schools are successful. Further, all nations should share their best ideas about schooling instead of looking to other nations as "competitors."

**A Template for Success**

Defining and articulating our core values, the ideas that dictate our actions, is a demanding and difficult task. Yet without a firm grasp on the values that determine our actions, how can we create a better future for our students? The Gettysburg Address provides a concise template—a model to help school leaders clarify their beliefs and lead more thoughtfully. Take the time to craft your own Gettysburg Address—it will make a difference.

|  |
| --- |
| **Learn More about Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address**[Listen to a podcast tour](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1305154) of the Gettysburg battlefield and detailed narrative of the battle, featuring historian James McPherson, author of *Hallowed Ground: A Walk at Gettysburg* (Crown Publishers, 2003).[View a short film](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4bM9geY0do) of the Gettysburg Address performed by actor Jeff Daniels and illustrated with pictures representing the Civil War, Gettysburg, and America.[Browse the Library of Congress exhibit](http://myloc.gov/Multimedia/Gettysburg.aspx) on the Gettysburg Address to view primary documents (including copies of the two original manuscripts in the Library's collection and the only existing photograph of Lincoln at the ceremony), and to view a fascinating video interview with exhibit curator John R. Sellers. |

**References**

Basler, R. (Ed.). (1953). *The collected works of Abraham Lincoln* (Vol. 5). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Burlingame, M. (2008). *Abraham Lincoln: A life* (Vols. 1–2). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Collins, J. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors*. New York: HarperCollins.

Evans, R. (1995). *The human side of school change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gardner, H. (1995). *Leading minds: An anatomy of leadership*. New York: Basic Books.

George, B. (2007). *True north*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Zenger, J., & Folkman, J. (2002). *The extraordinary leader*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

**Harvey Alvy** is the William C. Shreeve Endowed Professor in Educational Administration at Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington. **Pam Robbins** is an independent consultant residing in Mt. Crawford, Virginia. They are coauthors of *Learning from Lincoln: Leadership Practices for School Success* (ASCD, 2010).