

Abraham Lincoln, Bringing People Together, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, after September 11, 2001, I was speaking with the founder of an internet consulting firm in San Francisco. The firm was getting ready to close its doors and go out of business because all of its work had gone away. During the several years when the business had operated, they had consulted for a few firms that had ended up becoming very successful. However, the majority of the firms they consulted for had closed their doors and gone away. Since the founder of the company had been in the business for so long, I was very interested in his insights as to what made Internet companies successful.

"What do you think is the one thing that makes a company successful?" I asked him.

He did not hesitate to respond:

"The only companies I have seen become successful were those that were able to create a community by uniting people around something."

I thought a lot about that because the theme of uniting people around a common purpose is something that is quite rare. It is not only a trait of the most successful companies; it is also a trait of the most successful politicians, leaders, and others. Uniting people around a single idea or cause is something that is rare and very valued by the world.

Whenever a politician is unsuccessful, they usually blame the opposition. The Democrat will say it is impossible to work with the Republicans. The Republican will say it is impossible to work with the Democrats. In fact, the odds are that if you pick up any paper any day of the week, you will see someone blaming someone else for something. The leaders who are the most successful are those who can unite both sides around something. A unifying force is the greatest and most powerful sort of leader.

In the business world when I learn that someone I am considering doing business with has a reputation for conflict, suing people, and so forth—I generally avoid doing business with them. There are lots of people out there who have a reputation for being more divisive than unifying. When I encounter people like this, I have learned that it is always a good idea to stay away from them. There will always be conflict with them.

Several years ago, a very successful recruiter was interested in coming to work for a placement firm I own. He had an incredible number of high profile placements under his belt and was very good at what he did. Given how "high level" he was, I spent several weeks interviewing him, meeting with him, and probing to see what it would be like to work with him.

I was particularly concerned about doing business with him due to the problems he had with others in the past. I had spoken with people he had worked with in the past. They said good things about his performance, but described him in terms that alluded to the fact that he alienated the people he worked with.

While interviewing him I learned that he had been involved in a few lawsuits with people he worked with previously. When I learned about the lawsuits, alarm bells went off, and I decided that it did not make sense to go forward with him.

The man went into business with someone else and within a year he had sued the company and ended up putting it out of business. He had hired a big law firm to negotiate a very tough contract with all sorts of severe terms and so forth with the new company prior to going to work there. He was ready for conflict before it even started and based on the sorts of "sample contracts" he had sent me, it was clear that no matter what happened in my relationship with him it would be impossible for me to fulfill my conditions as an employer and make money with him. I have no doubt I too would have been sued had I gone into business with him. He seemed to sue everyone he did business with. He was just too divisive.

The success of your career will largely be determined by your ability to be a unifying force rather than a divisive force in the organizations you work for, or lead. The world wants people who unify rather than do the opposite. People who succeed are those who bring together rather than drive apart.

One of the most famous figures in American history is undoubtedly Abraham Lincoln. Many people, in fact, believe that he was the greatest president in United States' history.

Lincoln's greatest achievement, in my opinion, was his leadership of the United States during the Civil War. The Civil War was a time that threatened to tear the country into two. Despite being a small town lawyer from very humble beginnings, Lincoln was able to step forward and save the country, and also end slavery.

Before he was elected president, Lincoln's political life had involved a few local offices, a term in the United States House of Representative, and a failed run for the United States Senate. Notwithstanding a "slow start" to his political career, Lincoln was one of the most determined and unifying men to ever become president. Lincoln believed that preserving the Union was the most important thing in the world. Lincoln felt that the republican ideals that the Union embodied, would "perish from the earth" if the Union did not prevail in the Civil War.

Lincoln wrote some of the most memorable and powerful speeches in history to convince Americans to endure the terrible hardships of war. His speeches were crafted to keep Americans united around the Union's cause despite how horrible the losses were. One of Lincoln's most famous speeches was the Gettysburg address:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. 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. 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 — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Only a few days after the Confederate army surrendered, Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, a southern sympathizer. Lincoln had been planning to allow the Southern states to rejoin the Union on good terms and not punish the leaders of the rebellion. Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency after Lincoln's assassination. Ulysses S. Grant later wrote that Lincoln:

would have proven the best friend the South could have had. ... I knew his goodness of heart, his generosity, his yielding disposition, his desire to have everybody happy, and above all his desire to see all people of the United States enter again upon the full privileges of citizenship with equality among all.

The power of Lincoln, then, was his ability to unify people. His legacy is one of unifying people, and it is, I believe, for this reason that Lincoln is considered to have been such a great president.

In your life and career, the ability to bring together and unify is one of the strongest possible skills you can have. The greatest companies, leaders, and others bring people together and do not drive them apart.

You should ask yourself what you can do to bring people together at work and in your job. You should lessen friction rather than create friction. You should do everything you can to make the people around you get along together.

THE LESSON

Bringing people and elements together is one of the greatest skills you can possess, so you should strive to be a unifying rather than dividing force in any organization of which you are a part. Do everything in your power to help those around you get along, lessening rather than creating friction.

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