



Learning Leadership Lessons of the Past

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Interview with Michael J. Gelb
by Natalie Morera – 5/27/11

C.L.O.'s can draw lessons from historical leaders to better themselves and their employees.

The great leaders of the past are more than just history — they can serve as an invaluable template for leadership development today.

Michael J. Gelb, author of *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day*, has studied historical figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Edison to impart the lessons they hold for today's leaders. For example, Gelb said the notion of freedom, something Abraham Lincoln "championed in a universal way," applies to organizations today, but that many just pay lip service to it.

"How do you genuinely support an environment that encourages the freedom of ideas, that encourages people to really think for themselves?" Gelb asked. "One of the problems that leaders often have is ... an unconscious shadowy fear that if they really listen to everybody, and really get everybody to express all their opinions, that means they'll have to actually listen to them. They won't have the freedom to make their own decisions."

The decisions a leader makes will be far more intelligent because of the diverse opinions and points of view expressed, Gelb said. "It takes a very secure leader to genuinely encourage this democracy of ideas, but it is one of the powerful elements of a truly innovative culture."

An organizational culture of innovation and creativity has always been important, but because of the accelerated pace of change, analytical types now are being pushed to be creative and creative types are being pushed to be analytical. "A half a brain is a terrible thing to waste," Gelb said. "The new working world requires whole-brain thinking."

If leaders want whole-brained employees they have to embody it, since people will pay more attention to what is done rather than what is talked about. "Actually being creative is a good place for any CLO to start," Gelb said. "Then, it's recognizing that creative thinking is a skill. It's a competency that can be developed and it needs to be developed hand-in-hand with critical thinking."

Gelb cites Leonardo da Vinci as a model for a CLO. "He's probably the human being who utilized the most potential of anyone ever," Gelb said. "If you're interested in developing human potential, which is part of what I think being a CLO is all about, Leonardo da Vinci is a very powerful role model."

Da Vinci gave practical advice to his students to quicken the "spirit of invention," Gelb said.

"He says the secret is that you should look at abstract patterns like clouds in the sky or smoke emitted from fire," Gelb said. "Let your mind go free and you will see in these an infinity of things — divine landscapes that you may then reduce to their complete and proper forms. He's saying generate first, use the right hemisphere, get way out of the box, then step back and think about how it fits together and how it really applies to your practical situation."

Ron Felber, president and CEO of chemical supply company Chemetall, and author of *Presidential Lessons in Leadership*, said President Lincoln can be very influential to business leaders.

"He thinks about what he does, he ponders it, he goes to his advisers and then he acts," Felber said. "There's an analysis phase, a collaborative phase and an action phase — it's not necessarily a burst of action. It's a strategized approach to action that unfolds over time. That kind of measured, thoughtful response — there'd be a lot fewer mistakes made in hiring, firing and execution of business strategy if people were more deliberate."

Decision making and creative thinking are just some of the lessons to be learned. Felber pointed out that learning from failure is another important ability demonstrated by past leaders. "We should look at failures as learning opportunities, make sure they don't happen again and learn lessons from them," Felber said.

He cited the definition of a birdbrain. "Birds keep repeating the same things over and over again," Felber said. "They apparently don't have the power to learn. That's obviously not what we want to do. We want to build on our cultural achievements, but to build on them you have to know what they are."