

Unfinished Work: Learning From the Past for the Future

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous and justly praised Gettysburg Address. His 264-word oration is a classic, recognized as one of the finest speeches of all time. The event was the somber dedication of a cemetery for the nearly 22,000 Union and 28,000 Confederate soldiers who had fallen in one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War. His first sentence set the tone for the solemn, historic occasion: "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." The effect of Lincoln's relatively short speech was clearly disproportionate to the time he spent on stage. Lincoln followed Edward Everett, a master orator of the time. The day after the dedication, Everett wrote to the 16th president of the United States, "I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

Lincoln's deft, succinct articulation of a unifying vision for the country transcends time and place. His actions on that day and throughout his presidency are a reminder of the challenges that still lie before each and every American. To truly live as citizens of a free nation, we must accept and cultivate diversity in all our institutions. Such a vision is so necessary and worthy, Lincoln told us, that it is worth fighting for and, if need be, dying for.

I recently attended an excellent leadership development course in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, entitled Lincoln: Vision and Purpose. The course was taught by Betty and John Schroeder of Leadership Associates (www.leadershipassociates.com).

The unique premise of this workshop was the relevance of Lincoln's message in today's world and the desirability of somehow bringing his leadership principles to life. Leadership Associates offers similar courses on the precepts and legacies of other great leaders, among them Thomas Jefferson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Sitting Bull. The motto informing the workshop I attended was "History doesn't repeat itself; people who do not pay attention to history repeat its mistakes." Needless to say, I paid close attention.

The opportunity to participate in this course fulfilled a boyhood dream of mine to visit Gettysburg. During the course we dug into the details of the battle at Gettysburg, fought July 1–3, 1863, as well as demographic trends in the northern and southern states before and during the Civil War. For the most part, however, the course focused on Lincoln's overriding vision: A constitutional union of free states spanning the continent. We studied how he implemented his vision through a revolving door of army generals and cabinet members, and it was enthralling to see lessons emerge concerning tragic war events, Lincoln's various talents as a leader, and ways through which I could become a better leader in the day-to-day business of the 21st century.

My experience at the workshop speaks loudly and clearly to this special issue on diversity. Lincoln was a leader who recognized that the institution of slavery was inconsistent with the founding tenet of this country "that all men are created equal." Slavery threatened the continued existence of the United States because it perpetuated a gross inequality. Lincoln believed so strongly in his vision that he took action as a leader to end these atrocities. In the process, he started our country down the path of treating all people with decency and equality.

In pursuit of his vision, Lincoln gave the ultimate sacrifice—his own life. It is my belief that President Lincoln wanted all people, irrespective of their gender, religion, skin color, physical challenges, sexual preferences, or age, to be free and to be treated as equals. What a wonderful example he set, and what a challenge remains for us! The articles printed in this issue champion the same cause President Lincoln expressed so eloquently in his commemoration at Gettysburg. As he said so well on that occasion, "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."

To finish the work that Lincoln and the brave Union soldiers started, we must struggle and settle for nothing less than our best effort. We hope you find this issue inspirational and instructive as you embrace diversity in your workplace, your home, and your community.

—Jeffrey S. Russell, Ph.D., P.E.