



The Failures of Abraham Lincoln: What Lincoln teaches us about leadership

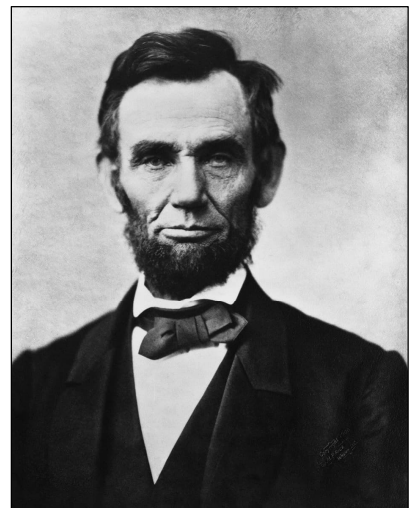
Quite often, we get asked the question, *are leaders made or born*. The answer is easy. Think about anyone that is considered a good or great leader today. Were they leaders at age one? At age five? Of course not, they *grew* into leadership roles later in their life.

The question then becomes, *how did they grow into the leaders they are today? What influences had the greatest impact in shaping the leaders that they have become today? Can we capture that lightning in a bottle?*

The ‘great leader’ concept, however, is an illusion. For every person we hold up as a great leader, (Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ghandi are always on the list) we tend to be oblivious to the trials and tribulations of that leader. We don’t always see their failures.

Think about Abraham Lincoln for example. His life story is filled with failed efforts and setbacks:

- 1832: Defeated for state legislature
- 1833: Failed in business
- 1835: Lincoln’s fiancé Anne Rutledge dies of typhoid
- 1836: Has a nervous breakdown
- 1838: Defeated for Speaker
- 1843: Defeated for nomination to Congress
- 1849: Rejected for land officer
- 1854: Defeated for US Senate
- 1856: Defeated for nomination for Vice President
- 1858: Defeated for US Senate
- 1860: Elected as President



Abraham Lincoln

If nothing else, Lincoln’s path to becoming a great leader is more about persistence, humility, resilience, and getting back up on the horse to ride again. Looking at that list, who among us would continue to run for election after so many disappointments?

Put yourself into Lincoln’s shoes for a moment. The list above documents 10 moments of what would be considered *life changing* events for any of us. Try to imagine how optimistic or driven you would have to be to continue pressing forward, year after year, with a mounting sense of your history of failure. Did we mention that he struggled with depression throughout his life?

With each of these moments, Lincoln’s character and fortitude was forged to make him into the man he became as president.



For new leaders, Lincoln's humility and resilience proves that we can embrace the idea that throughout our lives, we will experience failures, disappointments, tragic life events, and unrealized aspirations and continue to become better leaders. Great leaders LEARN from their mistakes, they create new connections and meaningfulness from these events in life, knowing that they matter! Our missteps along the way may hurt like hell, but through the pain we become forged into better leaders *if we are able to learn from those missteps.*