Matt Stang

Collaborative Leadership Final Exam

*Lincoln* Movie Dissection

Dr. Fairhurst

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Steven Spielberg’s 2012 film *Lincoln* takes the viewer through a series of heated events revolving around the conclusion of the Civil War as well as the passage of the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Although this film lead to Daniel Day-Lewis’ Academy Award for Best Actor, *Lincoln* provides a plethora of collaborative leadership examples when further analyzed using a communications lens. In this paper I will address a wide variety of topics that apply to this film primarily relating to Grint’s work, models of collaboration outlined in *Share, Don’t Take the Lead*, principles of dialogue from chapters two and three of *Dialogue and Deliberation*, and previous class topics such as mental models, framing types, and priming among many more.

Grint’s work touches upon a number of communication subjects that have a powerful presence in this film. The first topic that arises is the differentiation between managers and leaders. According to Grint, managers deal in the short term, with less uncertain, tame problems; whereas leaders deal in the long term, with more uncertain, wicked problems. During the scene in which Lincoln explains his rationale as to how the constitution justifies his powers as president, we observe his first signs of leadership as Grint would classify it. Lincoln not only deals with but actively engages with the ambiguity of both the constitution and the situation. Later, Lincoln asks the telegram operators whether or not people choose to be born. He then uses this rhetorical question as an opportunity to draw a larger point on the natural equality of all men. Therefore, in this example we see Lincoln exhibiting the “ask the right question” trait of a leader as opposed to the “provide the answer” trait of a manager. Lincoln continues to build as a leader in the scene in which he debates with Thaddeus Stevens about how to pursue passage of the thirteenth amendment. As seen in this example, both of these individuals demonstrate leadership qualities as they strategically plan for the long term future course of action. Finally, as Lincoln reaffirms the necessity for the amendment after a southern peace plan is unveiled as a possibility, one can note Lincoln’s ability to recognize a wicked problem and avoid the temptation to settle for an elegant solution. The next major concept the Grint introduces is the notion of the commander leadership style (deal with crisis and provide strong answers) and the ability to reframe situations to match this style. President Lincoln exhibits commander-like behavior numerous times throughout this film, notably in the scenes in which he uses his position as president to demand gathering the necessary votes for the amendment, and when he is discussing surrender with the Confederacy’s vice president aboard the River Queen. In both of these instances, Lincoln shows a very hard stance and is clearly driving a “this is how it is going to be” approach to a situation that he has framed as urgent and complex. Other characters in *Lincoln* also demonstrate attributes of the commander leadership style. For example, Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln’s Secretary of War, storms out during the attack on Port Fisher when Lincoln decides to tell one of his tales. Clearly, Mr. Stanton has taken on the commander leadership style as a fit for the position of Secretary of War and saw the ongoing attack as a crisis situation. This backdrop for his character explains his remarkable intolerance for Lincoln’s laid back story-telling. As hinted at earlier, one of the defining features of this film is the presence of highly complex problems that have no definitive end and evolve over time, also known as wicked problems. The primary wicked problem that President Lincoln faces is the struggle between ending the Civil War and getting the thirteenth amendment to abolish slavery passed. Rather than focusing on the obvious plot developments that portray this, I will instead highlight the more subtle events that truly depict the situation’s wickedness. Fairly early in the movie there is a scene in which a husband and wife talk with Lincoln about a miscellaneous concern over misappropriated toll booth possession. In their dialogue it is revealed that the “people” (using the couple to generalize for the population) support the amendment but only as an end to the war, not out of a profound distaste for slavery. Therefore, it can be seen that there is a tricky nature even to the support Lincoln currently has for the amendment, an intricate relationship between politicians and the public, and a pressure that arises from this relationship to treat the problem as a simple equation (e.g. tame). Prior to a debate at the House of Representatives, Thaddeus Stevens (a radical House Republican) is urged by party members to control his true feelings about equality as the newspapers were present and his beliefs may hurt the amendment’s chances of passage. This excerpt depicts the necessity for a collective that a wicked problem demands as well as the discomfort that this requirement can create. At one point in the film, Lincoln feels that the tension between ending the war and passing the amendment is rising to the degree that he stays up all night contemplating which to pursue. Before the sun has risen, Lincoln makes the statement that it is time to end the war without any more corpses while reading the story of a sixteen year old boy that was to be hung for laming his horse to avoid battle. Much later in the film, Democrats in the House of Representatives expose the potential of a southern peace plan and attempt to “postpone the vote”. Both of these previous examples serve to show that wicked problems continue to evolve and quite often have unintended consequences embedded within seemingly sound decisions. As *Lincoln* is occupied with the presence of wicked problems, it goes in turn that there is also a myriad of examples for the concept of clumsy solutions. Clumsy solutions are the antithesis to elegant solutions, essentially deriving from compromise and a collaborative collective. During the initial cabinet meeting, the viewer observes Lincoln dismiss the cabinet’s notion that an elegant solution (e.g. either signing a peace agreement or passing the amendment) would be enough to truly solve the wicked problem placed before the divided nation. In addition, Lincoln meets with specific Democratic targets to attempt to gain more votes as well as talks with Ulysses S. Grant (Confederate general) after the war about striving for liberty not punishment during the reconstruction period. In each of these instances Lincoln demonstrates that one must accept the challenge to step outside their comfort zone in order to effectively construct a clumsy solution. However, President Lincoln is only one of many characters to show a relationship to clumsy solutions throughout the film. Thaddeus Stevens listens to Lincoln’s compass analogy as they debated how to further pursue passage of the thirteenth amendment and even managed to temper his emotions (as Lincoln urged) when confronted about his radical beliefs on the House floor. The clumsy nature of Stevens’ actions can primarily be spotted by his willingness to compromise and participate in displeasing actions in the hopes of attaining a larger goal. Furthermore, the fact that any negotiation with the Confederacy (aka “the traitors”) took place as well as the presence and dealings of the “operatives” to procure votes for the amendment are excellent examples of clumsy solutions for similar reasons as the previous example. The final takeaway from Grint’s work that can be related to *Lincoln* is the concept of hard versus soft power. Hard power typically involves force or coercion to ensure compliance whereas soft power typically relies on influencing to gain conformation. *Lincoln* is an interesting piece of cinematography as it showcases both of these styles as well as how one character may exhibit each. For example, as Lincoln learns that his son, Robert, is insisting upon enlisting in the army, Lincoln attempts to forbid this behavior via his position as president (hard power). However, in the professional setting of the initial cabinet meeting, Lincoln uses a stream of logic to influence the aggressive opinions of his cabinet that the solution must be either ending the war or passing the amendment (soft power contrasting the hard power exhibited by the cabinet). Grint’s work provided numerous communication topics that had a powerful influence throughout *Lincoln* that help to further understand the application of collaborative leadership when analyzed deeper.

For a portion of this semester, our Collaborative Leadership class presented chapter reports on *Share, Don’t Take the Lead* which outlined various models of collaboration including: rotated shared leadership, integrated shared leadership, distributed shared leadership, and comprehensive shared leadership. In comparing these styles to their application in *Lincoln*, I will focus on rotated shared leadership and comprehensive shared leadership. Rotated shared leadership is defined as the conscious strategy of alternating who takes the role of leadership at different times. A perfect example of this collaborative model in the film is the debates that occur in the House of Representatives. Each representative has the right to speak their thoughts when they have the floor, and the process of who is speaking is determined consciously by the speaker of the house in an intentionally rotated fashion. However, this model of collaboration can also be observed in less apt examples. For instance, during the initial cabinet meeting, a comparison can be drawn to the Maryland Shock Trauma model of rotated shared leadership outlined in chapter two of *Share, Don’t Take the Lead*. This branch off of the typical model discusses that the conscious strategy of alternating who leads may be based upon an understanding of relevant expertise. Applied to the film, each secretary in the cabinet is the relative expert for their area, and the cabinet meeting highlights the function when all of these individuals come together in a collaborative fashion. However, it can be noted slightly later in the film the tension that is created when a leader does not respect the opinion of one of the members of the group (referring to scene in which William Henry Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, is upset at the fact Lincoln did not disclose to him that there was in fact a southern peace talk in the process). Comprehensive shared leadership is a model in which the overall concept of shared leadership (generally defined as people in the process of leading each other towards a common goal) is incorporated throughout the entire culture of the organization. If the viewer looks at America as an organization, Lincoln’s statement that “It’ll be for the people to keep it up,” (coming in his brief yet symbolic speech during the raising of the American flag) drives home at the idea that citizens of the United States play a direct role in collaborating through their elected officials to lead the nation to prosperity, thus making this simple statement a very appropriate demonstration of this type of collaborative model as described in *Share, Don’t Take the Lead*.

As a supplement to our in class instruction, our class read out of various texts, one of which was *Dialogue and Deliberation*. The chapters that our class read from this work highlighted some of the finer points of dialogue (ranging from how we view conflict in the argument culture to how to develop skills to engage in deliberative inquiry). As with the previous portions of this paper, I will relate these topics back to examples present in the film that exemplify their meaning. Chapter two of *Dialogue and Deliberation* begins by bringing up the understanding of the negative feelings that tend to arise in the presence of an altering viewpoint. This theory is strongly supported in *Lincoln* and can be primarily seen in the numerous debates that occur in the House of Representatives. For example, the viewer observes Lincoln being likened to a dictator by Democrats (actual quotes from Fernando Wood include: “his highness King Abraham Africanis I” and “our great usurping Caesar”) and a plethora of shouting and merciless insults such as Thaddeus Stevens’ comparison of Democrats to reptiles and the accusation that they contain “slime for blood”. After acknowledging this natural aversion, *Dialogue and Deliberation* follows up by insisting on the interdependence of the world. Similar to the first point, there are a vast number of instances in the film that point towards this nature of interdependence such as: Lincoln knows all representatives in the House by name (interdependence between authority levels), the citizenry’s conditional support for the thirteenth amendment (interdependence of people and politicians), the southern Republican help to pursue peace not the amendment (interdependence within the Republican party), Lincoln’s plea for his cabinet to stand behind him at the initial cabinet meeting (interdependence between Lincoln and cabinet), the negotiations with the Confederacy (interdependence between the Union and the Confederacy), and the work of the operatives to gather amendment support within the Democratic party (interdependence between Democrat and Republican parties). As seen by the previous list, the prevalence of interdependence in the world is indisputable and can even occur between highly unlikely pairs. The final subject of chapter two of *Dialogue and Deliberation* is the ethical imperative for cooperation amidst the previous realizations. The viewer can observe this concept in *Lincoln* through the various unsavory partnerships that form in order to bring together the clumsy solution to the nation’s scourge of slavery and war. The deep set values that spur characters’ actions (such as Lincoln’s insistence on justice and equality) are the driving force behind this ethical imperative for cooperation. As seen by the results of the film, overcoming difficult relationships by focusing on the ethics in play will ultimately result in the most positive outcome. Chapter Three of *Dialogue and Deliberation* revolves around the tools needed for what is called deliberative inquiry. The first ability that the chapter outlines is a need to engage with the disagreement developed as natural in chapter two (a good relation to the film would be any engagement with the Democratic Party that occurs by either the operatives, Thaddeus Stevens, or Lincoln throughout the film). Next, the chapter depicts the skill of testing a source’s credibility. This ability can be observed in action in *Lincoln*’s scenes in which William Seward (Secretary of State) is angered that Lincoln did not reveal the potential of a southern peace plan (trust shaken through secrets), and Lincoln’s issuing of a dodgy denial when House Democrats threatened to postpone the vote (challenging for written confirmation shows testing and even afterwards there is further reflection on the degree of credibility). The next topic that chapter three introduces is understanding values. The two major values that prevail throughout *Lincoln* are President Lincoln’s belief in equality and justice and a common value in the House of Representatives of a responsibility to God. These values drive each character’s actions; therefore, understanding yours and others’ values will enhance your ability to engage in deliberative inquiry. The last topic in chapter three of *Dialogue and Deliberation* is the challenge that cynicism poses to the entire process of deliberative inquiry. Noteworthy examples of cynicism in *Lincoln* (primarily relating to the possibility of passing the thirteenth amendment) occur when Mary Todd Lincoln (Lincoln’s wife) expresses doubt about the amendment after Lincoln opens up about his symbolic ship dream and William Seward’s insistence that the amendment will not pass due to a lack of support from the constituents (exposed via questioning a couple who came to Lincoln) as well as an inability to procure the needed twenty votes for passage. Similar to the observable benefits of pursuing the ethical imperative of cooperation, if one can overcome these bouts of cynicism the movie shows that amazing results can pan out. *Dialogue and Deliberation* introduces a new array of communication topics that serve as excellent tools to further dissect Spielberg’s film, *Lincoln*.

Hitherto this point in the paper all of the topics of discussion have come from subjects investigated post-midterm. However, there are an abundance of concepts from the first half of this course that also have a strong role in this film such as mental models, framing types, priming and many more. Beginning with mental models we recall that a mental model focuses primarily on how one’s mind actually processes the culture that surrounds it and ultimately answers the question, “How does the world function?” A powerful mental model that pervades throughout *Lincoln* is the belief that only ending the Civil War or passing the thirteenth amendment can be accomplished successfully (seen at the initial cabinet meeting, through the numerous cynics, and outright stated numerous times by various characters). Fortunately, President Lincoln did not share in this underdeveloped mental model and continued to push for justice. Similar to that point, it occasionally occurs that the viewer can observe two or more people having very different concepts as to how a subject should be interpreted. For example, consider the disparity between how President Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens view their role as public servants. Lincoln takes a very strategic stance as to the appropriate manner of approaching the final goal whereas Stevens essentially claims it is necessary to pursue what is good regardless of what the people think. Both elected officials draw from a political and social discourse as well as their previous life experiences in the formulation of these vastly conflicting mental models. As Lincoln is the main character of the film, much more time is spent developing his mental models as to what it means and how to serve as president of the United States. During the initial cabinet meeting, Lincoln’s stream of logic on how he interpreted the U.S. Constitution helps to define the reality of his powers while later he uses his position as president to demand the gathering of the necessary votes for his amendment. Both of these examples help to show how Lincoln’s mental model develops through practice during the course of the film. Framing is the process of defining the “here and now” and participating in the co-construction of reality. As framing occurs quite frequently (although most likely undetected by those less communication savvy) there are numerous standard framing types that have developed that pertain to *Lincoln*. The most important framing type that appears in this film is metaphorical frames as they clearly are President Lincoln’s favorite (being readily observable in his stories including: his whaler analogy to explain that it is finally the right time to pull in the big prize (e.g. ending slavery), his compass analogy to explain to Thaddeus Stevens that one must be wise in pursuing the ultimate goal, and his story to the telegram operators of Euclid’s basic law of mechanics to justify his belief in equality). However, many more framing types can be witnessed throughout *Lincoln* such as legitimacy frames (Lincoln’s stream of logic in the initial cabinet meeting to justify his actions and beliefs as well as Lincoln’s usage of his position to demand the necessary votes), simplifying frames (Lincoln’s summary in ending the war with “no more corpses” after a long night of contemplation and even uses the phrase of “focus on the here and now” when discussing the need for the thirteenth amendment over the possibility of a southern peace plan), gain/loss frames (William Seward’s logistics in the outlining of the number of votes remaining to be procured throughout the film and Lincoln’s statement to his wife that it is her role to either lighten his load or render it unbearable), and an anthem-like master frame (the Democrats chant to “postpone the vote”). When all of these frames come together in the film, what results is a rich dialogue that offers up a great deal of depth beyond the plot. Emotional contagion is ultimately a self-defining term. When emotions run high (either positive or negative) there is a tendency for these emotions to spread rapidly amongst a group or at the very least be reflected unconsciously by the other individuals present (goes back to the presence of mirror neurons). *Lincoln* offers up a superb example of emotional contagion in the numerous debates at the House of Representatives. What the viewer continuously observes is a representative make some form of outlandish or provocative statement which leads to the aforementioned spread of emotions (most notable Thaddeus Stevens’ rejection of full equality and accusation of the Democrats being less than equal in front of the newspapers). Priming is a technique of preparing yourself (or others) before a situation unfolds in order to emphasize or avoid certain aspects of communication spontaneously. In *Lincoln*, one may point to the acquisition of Democratic support for the thirteenth amendment as priming for the actual vote although I would like to focus more on the movie as a whole. Spielberg took great care in *Lincoln* to be as accurate as possible to the history of the era, and Daniel Day-Lewis spent an enormous amount of time learning (and almost becoming in a sense) one of America’s iconic presidents. However, as discussed by Dr. Fairhurst, with any Hollywood film there is a certain aspect of what is called the “Hero Making Machinery”. Lincoln is portrayed as extremely humble in the first scene as soldiers address him concerning the Gettysburg Address. Throughout the film there is a notable gentleness in his character and during the vote to abolish slavery he is with his youngest son. Therefore, for my point on priming, I would like to argue that the entire film of *Lincoln* is priming the viewer to think perhaps uncharacteristically positively of president Lincoln while marginalizing the collaborative efforts that took place and have been expounded upon in this paper.

At the conclusion of reflecting on Steven Spielberg’s film *Lincoln* from a communication perspective, the viewer can readily observe how various topics relating to communication played a major role in both understanding and contributing to the events that surrounded the passage of the thirteenth amendment. We investigated how Grint’s work helped to offer up a wide variety of topics that helped to categorize and contrast the larger happenings of the plot, models of collaboration outlined in *Share, Don’t Take the Lead* aided the discussion of how organizations incorporated collaborative principles effectively, chapters two and three from *Dialogue and Deliberation* provided a deeper look into the natural occurrences of communication as well as the tools to participate in deliberative inquiry, and previous class topics such as mental models, framing types, emotional contagion, and priming supported wrapping the work together with more general concepts. I enjoyed *Lincoln* greatly and it is quite easy to understand why it was such an excellent choice for dissection in our final paper.

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