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Learning Leadership Lessons of the Past

Natalie Morera - 5/27/11

CLOs 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."

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