

How to Predict Behavior Like Abraham Lincoln Did

By Gene Griessman, Ph.D.



Abraham Lincoln had an uncanny ability to predict behavior. For example, when Lincoln was President, he told one of his associates how every member of Congress would vote on a particular bill. To make the point, he wrote down what their votes would be. Sure enough, when the votes were tallied, Lincoln was on target for virtually every vote cast.

How did he do this?

No magic or superhuman powers were involved. Lincoln used resources that are within the reach of anyone, and with a bit of practice, you can use them effectively, too.

In general, behavior can be predicted in terms of a person's interests, group identity, character, and unconscious needs. Entire books have been written on this subject, but here's a brief overview:

One. **Interests** Interests have to do with one's own benefit or advantage; the focus is on the basic question, "What's in this for me?" If you're trying to predict a person's (or a group's) behavior, evaluate whether they will experience profit or loss, pleasure or pain from the outcome. Lincoln dealt mainly with politicians and lawyers, who habitually make these kinds of calculations. However, this approach is not foolproof because humans are more than human calculators. People sometimes behave irrationally--that is, they do not behave in their own best interests. So, you will have to include more than interests to become good at predictions.

Two. **Group Identity.** What groups do the individuals belong to or identify with? Do they think of themselves as Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, independents, Christians, gang members, labor or management? Sociologists call this "reference-group behavior." Ralph Waldo Emerson, a contemporary of Lincoln whose work Lincoln knew about, wrote: "If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument." Lincoln certainly took political affiliation (i.e. "sect") into the aforementioned calculation. You can see this principle at

work by looking at the party affiliation of the votes that are cast for particular bills in Congress. Whenever there is a deviation from sect affiliation, the decision will usually be based on interests.

Three. **Unconscious Needs.** Sigmund Freud discovered that behavior is sometimes neither rational nor irrational, but arational. Lincoln, of course, lived long before Freud, and did not use this concept as such in his predictions. But if you want to become a skillful forecaster, be aware that some behavior will seem to come out of nowhere. The source may be memories of experiences that are buried deep in the individual's unconscious mind--buried, but not dead.

Four. **Character.** Is the individual basically honest or dishonest, industrious or an idler, kind or a bully? An honest man may yield to temptation, but a dishonest man will look for it. An industrious man will take pride in his work. An idler will take pride in avoiding it. A kind man may be unkind, but regret it; a bully will be unkind and enjoy it.

Simply put, character is a blend of genetics and deeply rooted habits. Emerson wrote: "I suppose no man can violate his nature....A character is like an acrostic or Alexandrian stanza; read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing."

Lincoln's character was well known. Lincoln was Honest Abe. He got this name because people learned that if you dealt with Lincoln, he would not deceive you or cheat you.

If you want to predict behavior, do what Lincoln did, and observe carefully to see if the person is basically honest or deceitful, a giver or a taker, diligent or careless. Once you understand a person's character, you will seldom be surprised by their behavior.

One quick story about character. Once there was a scorpion that wanted to cross a river. Seeing a frog, the scorpion asked the frog if he could ride on his back across the river.

"I can't do that," replied the frog, "because if you rode on my back, you would sting me and I would die."

"Why would I sting you?" answered the scorpion. "It is not in my best interest to sting you. If I stung you, we would both drown."

"That's true," said the frog, who then allowed the scorpion to climb on his back.

In the middle of the river, the frog felt a sharp sting in his back.

"Why have you stung me," screamed the frog in pain. "It is not in your best interest to sting me."

Replied the scorpion: "Because it is my nature to sting. You knew what I was when you let me ride on your back."

About the author:

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