Don't just read it, live it!

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper is based on actual teaching experience and aims to demonstrate the value of using historic role models, events, visits, and story telling to help students retain leadership concepts.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Examples from leadership programs based on Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Clara Barton, and Fredrick Douglass, illustrate how powerful stories and site visits drive home key concepts and ensure the message stays with the audience over time.*

Findings – *Colorful stories not only make learning interesting, they drive home key concepts in a way that is easy to grasp and twice as likely to be retained. Programs based on historic role models gain added poignancy by being held in historic sites, near museums, battlefields, and historic homes. Add a visit by a reenactor, and participants find themselves drawn into the case study emotionally, as they ''re-live'' historic events and discover the relevance to the contemporary workplace and its challenges. These tools of ''active learning'' demonstrate how individuals who experience a lesson have greater understanding of the material presented, longer-term recall, and greater problem-solving skills than is the norm with traditional, passive learning.*

Practical implications – *While some organizations balk at the cost of ''field trips'' for training, others recognize the long-term benefits of engaging participants in active (vs passive) learning. Teaching through historical analogy should be encouraged for its longer-term lesson retention.*

Originality/value – *At a time when organizations are increasing the use of ''distance learning'' or computer-based training, it is important to evaluate the use of off-site programs in terms of learning retention – particularly in the field of leadership development, an area of critical need in many organizations.*

Keywords *Leadership, Training, Storytelling, Learning*

Paper type *General review*

While the use of historical analogy as a teaching tool is not a new phenomenon, what is new is the proliferation of the concept – from books to movies to leadership workshops.

More and more front-line educators are embracing what behaviorists have known for some time: tangible examples of an abstract concept, particularly those that trigger an emotional response in an audience (like historical events), are a powerful way to demonstrate a point. These real-life stories drive home the key concepts and ensure that the message stays with the audience over time.

Learning from historic role models

In fact, the annals of history boast an endless supply of visionary leaders, gripping events, and epic story lines. Got a sticky merger to deal with? Alexander the Great dealt with scores of them as he enlarged his empire to include most of the known world.

Finding it difficult to motivate your employees in the face of budget cuts or lack of equipment? Winston Churchill motivated an entire nation to do more with less while building a coalition that stopped the Nazi war machine at the English Channel.

Think you have it tough holding together a crumbling department, division or company? Abraham Lincoln, elected US President in 1860 with only 40 percent of the popular vote, watched helplessly as six states seceded from the union before he even took office. Five more left soon after his inauguration, forming a rival organization – the Confederate States of America. Then, barely four weeks into his term, the Confederates attacked a federal fort, touching off civil war.

So how did Lincoln manage to hold things together and re-unite the nation? He energetically articulated his vision – saving the union – making it clear to all who would listen, and he communicated it continuously, until there was no doubt of his purpose.

Leadership programs based on Lincoln's example take on added poignancy when conducted in such Lincoln-linked sites as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania or Springfield, Illinois. Workshop attendees, can walk in Lincoln's footsteps, on streets that look much as they did in the mid-1800s. In Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln's second-floor law office faces the old State Capitol building, and only a few blocks away, in a quiet residential neighborhood, stands Lincoln's home. It is easy to picture the gaunt figure of Lincoln walking into one of these buildings, if you have been studying his life and now step into his surroundings.

In Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where Lincoln delivered his immortal Gettysburg Address, it is only a short walk from the restored train station which saw Lincoln's arrival in town, to the home where Lincoln spent the night before delivering his speech. Walk down the street where Lincoln rode in the parade to the national cemetery, and you will see Civil War-era houses lining both sides of the street. If you are in town during a parade or a summer weekend, you are likely to find the streets peopled with Civil War reenactors, with ladies in hoop-skirted dresses and the men in wool uniforms.

Walk in the footsteps of giants

Leadership training can benefit enormously by locating a program in a relevant historic setting – for instance a battlefield site, a restored village (with no high-rise buildings in sight), a Presidential library or historic home.

Picture a class on Winston Churchill's Second World War leadership including a stop at the underground Cabinet War Rooms and the Churchill Museum; a D-Day program on the leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower that includes a walk on the Normandy beaches; or a program on Abraham Lincoln's power of communications that is held in the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address in a cemetery whose marble stones still inspire a respectful silence from visitors.

Historic battlefields have long been used by military schools because they can bring to life the tactical errors and successes of the troops who fought there. Students study the battles before they arrive, then role-play the parts of key decision-makers while stopping to view the sites of action. Some battlefields allow tours on horseback, on bicycle, and even two-wheeled Segway Transporters. Such tours allow personal participation in a way that a large bus filled with camera-toting visitors cannot replicate.

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All leadership studies are not about military battles, however. There are countless civilian role models whose stories offer today's leader valuable lessons. A walk through a leader's home can bring to light the personality of the historic figure. Think of the palatial homes you have toured, and contrast them with the modest homes of others.

In Washington, DC, such a contrast of personal styles can be seen in a study of civilian leaders in the US Civil War. Tour the home of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and you will see a stark, no-nonsense home that is more warehouse than living quarters. It was, indeed, a warehouse that Barton used to store bedding and medical supplies for the American Red Cross, an organization she built after learning of the shortages of supplies during the Civil War. Then drive past the US Capitol and up a high hill to the Victorian home of abolitionist Frederick Douglass. His home is filled with gifts from leaders of the mid-1800s (including a cane used by Abraham Lincoln), paintings, and family mementoes. Upstairs is a room that the widowed Douglass kept as a shrine to his first wife, the woman who helped him escape from slavery. Such settings bring to life the people being studied better than any classroom discussion. And students become engaged in learning more about these historic role models. Students are free to explore with their eyes, their feet, and their emotions, as they tour the grounds.

Add color to the classroom

In today's world, where our daily routine is filled with visual images on television screens, computer monitors, and mobile phone screens, it would be hard to keep a class focused if an instructor did not add visual support to a presentation. Historic leaders have been depicted in movies, on television, in photographs and paintings. There is simply no excuse for a boring ''death by PowerPoint'' slide show, when the instructor has access to libraries and the Internet for pictures, paintings, movie clips, or *YouTube*.

And what about a visit by an historic interpreter/reenactor? Using an individual who can stay ''in character'' as a historic figure allows students to question the role model, asking for interpretations of key points. A skilled and experienced reenactor can bring credibility to the historic role model. Students frequently report that they truly understood key leadership concepts when they were explained by uniformed interpreters, rather than classroom instructors. In the US, there are so many Abraham Lincoln interpreters, that they have their own association, meeting annually to share experiences. Far from being amateur reenactors, these men are skilled first-person actors, who have spent their lives studying the famous President, and who can answer questions on any topic about Lincoln. It is the instructor's job, then, to link the reenactor's ''press conference'' with the topics addressed earlier in the classroom.

Remember the story, remember the lesson

Using history to teach important leadership concepts such as strategic thinking, problem-solving, effective communication and team building can make these concepts not only much more accessible and comprehensible, but also interesting, relevant and memorable.

As management guru Tom Peters points out in his book, *A Passion for Excellence*, ''human beings reason largely by means of stories, not by mounds of data'' (Peters and Austin, 1985). Roger Schank, founder of the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University and author of *Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory*, notes that, ''stories illustrate points better than simply stating the points themselves because, if the story is good enough, you usually don't have to state your point at all; the hearer thinks about what you have said and figures out the point independently'' (Schank, 1990).

Stories that illustrate a particular lesson also tend to stay in our memories much longer than an abstract concept or list of facts. According to Peg Neuhauser, author of *Corporate*

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Legends and Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool, stories create images in the mind that are stored in memory more directly and easily than hard data. Stories also tend to make the information being presented more believable, which is why advertisers often design their ads around a story. For these reasons, Neuhauser calls stories, ''the single most powerful form of human communication'' (Neuhauser, 1993).

Reliving stories of the Second World War

From the darkest days of the Second World War, masterful leaders arose to inspire their respective nations. Winston Churchill, acknowledging his nation's limited resources, employed towering rhetoric to inspire the British people to rise to the challenges of war. He also turned his energies to the task of building coalitions among nations to supply the equipment and troops necessary to defeat the Axis powers.

In 1940, when Churchill took office as Prime Minister, Hitler appeared unstoppable, Japan was expanding unchecked in the Far East, while many nations (including the US) remained neutral. By 1945, there would be only nine sovereign states in the world that had not taken sides, and nearly all had aligned against the Fascists (Harmon, 1994). Churchill's success in building coalitions offers lessons for today's leaders – from his ability to articulate clearly his ideas and vision, to his persistence, using letters and cables, traveling thousands of miles for personal visits and formal conferences, and public appeals through speeches.

Coalition-building meant crafting working relations with such strong egos as Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Charles de Gaulle. Churchill employed charm, alternating with logic and toughness, followed by more persuasion, until he wore most people down. His approach was hard, hard work, involving thousands of miles of travel (by ship, air, rail, and road, at a time when such travel was not as easy as it is today). He was not a young man (70 years old when the war in Europe ended), but he was an energetic leader.

Dr Christopher Harmon, former professor at the US Marine Corps University, credits Churchill with another critical leadership trait – giving the world a vision that was not only political, but moral. ''The vision was that of the democracies standing up against better armed tyrannies and prevailing with moral force until such time as they could win with material force'' (Harmon, 1994). ''I was not the lion,'' Churchill famously declared after the war, ''but it fell to me to give the lion's roar.''

Site visits abound for a Churchill-based workshop, as this world leader traveled half a million miles during the Second World War. From the Churchill Museum, Cabinet War Rooms, and Imperial War Museum in London to the numerous cities he visited in the US, to North Africa, France, Canada, or Yalta (where Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill met), a site-based leadership workshop can provide inspiration and lasting memories of this war-time leader.

Can I be a leader, too?

On the beaches of Normandy, it does not take much imagination to see the enormity of Dwight D. Eisenhower's leadership challenge. This quiet, thoughtful, analytical leader was as different from Churchill in temperament and style as night is from day, Yet he was called to lead the largest military undertaking in history – the landing of half a million soldiers on an enemy coast. Taking the reigns of responsibility, he worked to build an international force,

battling not only the organizational issues of multiple military structures, but also the enormous egos in his command staff.

A leadership analysis of both Eisenhower and Churchill in the Second World War provides colorful examples of different leadership styles, demonstrating how each style can be successful. Students often report that they feel encouraged to move into more senior roles after studying Eisenhower, who reflects their own analytical style. They recognize the organizing and building skills he brought to the military undertaking of D-Day. They come to appreciate the power of listening as a tool of engaging others, and they learn the effectiveness of questioning and listening in order to negotiate between strong-willed personalities.

A classroom study of Eisenhower's style of building alliances can be greatly enhanced with a visit to any of the D-Day museums around the world. The enormity of the task facing this leader comes alive, as students see photos and newsreels of the operation, view equipment from the landings, and tally the lists of nations that contributed their naval, air, and ground forces.

Channeling emotion

The use of stories, historical events, and site visits to teach leadership concepts is tied to another important element of learning – emotion. At the workshop level, the emotive impact of a lesson that focuses on historical figures and events is usually much greater than a theory-based course or one based on fictional company case studies – because history is so much more tangible. You can easily see it, touch it, read it, and even picture yourself in the midst of it. It is so powerful.

From a comprehension perspective, James Zull, professor of biochemistry and director of the University Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education at Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland, Ohio), notes that emotions are critical in determining how the brain accepts, processes and retains information. And while emotions do not appear to impact short-term memory, long-term memory, as well as reasoning, is strongly influenced by the emotion centers of the brain (Zull, 1998).

While emotion plays an important role in learning, it also has a part to play in an effective leader's implementation (and an organization's acceptance) of change, according to Harvard Professor John Kotter:

> People change their behavior when they are motivated to do so, and that happens when you speak to their feelings. Nineteen logical reasons don't necessarily do it. You need something, often visual, that helps produce the emotions that motivate people to move more than one inch to the left or one inch to the right. Great leaders are brilliant at this. They tell the kind of stories that create pictures in your mind and have emotional impact. Imagine, someone once told me, if Martin Luther King, Jr had stood up there in front of the Lincoln Memorial and said, ''I have a business strategy.'' King didn't do that. He said, ''I have a dream,'' and he showed us what his dream was, his picture of the future. You get people to change less by giving them an analysis that changes their thinking than by showing them something that affects their feelings (Kotter, 2003).

Back in 1916, John Dewey, the celebrated educator, noted in his book *Democracy and Education,* that, ''education is not an affair of 'telling,' and being told, but an active, constructive process'' (Dewey, 1997). Although the term had not yet been coined, what Dewey was talking about is ''active learning'' – a teaching method in which students do much more than passively listen to a lecturer. It involves students reading, writing, discussing, role-playing or otherwise becoming engaged in problem-solving exercises. It also involves higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and it encourages students to extrapolate from their own experiences and apply what they have learned in the past to the new information being presented (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

Table I Lesson presentation style and comparative recall rate

	Told (%)	*Told and shown (%)*	*Told, shown and experienced (%)*
Recall after three weeks	70	72	85
Recall after three months	10	32	65

Source: Whitmore (2009)

Essentially, it means moving students from passivity to activity as educators move from a teach-by-telling model to one involving much more teacher-student interaction.

Any battlefield can offer students the opportunity for involved analysis. Stand on a hilltop overlooking a battlefield, and you can not help but ask yourself how you might have handled a decision, or wonder how you might have misunderstood a command with the sounds of artillery all around. Walk across a field of battle at a measured pace, and marvel at the emotions and thoughts that crowd your mind. What would I have done?

For a team-building class, consider examining historic explorers. Follow their steps through the woods, along a mountain trail, or along a river, and then discuss the need to depend on other people. Put your teams in boats and let them row along the rivers explored by historic figures, and the lessons of team-building become immediately clear.

Studies have shown that this kind of active learning results in a greater understanding of the material presented, longer-term recall of the lessons, and the development of greater problem-solving skills than traditional, passive learning. Research by IBM and the British Royal Post Office has shown that in an active learning environment in which individuals experience a lesson (in addition to being told and shown the lesson) the recall rate for the information increases dramatically versus a lesson plan that only involves information being orally or visually presented (Whitmore, 2009) (Table I).

In today's ultra-competitive business world, executives are pressured to deploy all the weapons in their arsenals to stay ahead of the opposition and win the day. This is not the time to cut back on training funds with ''distance learning'' or computer-based training.

The development of an organization's leaders is more critical than ever before, and such training should inspire. So why not tap the wisdom and experience of history's greatest leaders? Though they may be long gone, their achievements still stand.

History-based story telling can be a relevant and inspiring way for today's executives to gain valuable insight and direction. As Winston Churchill said, ''study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft.''

Locate the training at the site of the events being studied, and you provide an unforgettable learning experience, as participants will not just read the story, they will live it!

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