In reflecting on the list of commonalities among the democratic ethical leaders, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which I have been placed where I feel that I can truly measure
up against the traits that these exemplars have manifested. I have thought about several scenarios that may fit and will try my best to describe the following situation in light of what I have learned about the marks of a true leader.

As mentioned in class and other papers, I am responsible for training on the financial administrative systems at a major institution. Prior to working in higher education directly, I worked with institutions to implement new systems and applications. As a trainer and really, someone who is bringing change and new technology to a group, it is important to be confident and educated as you lead the group through a cultural and systemic change. What I have found is that the technology is nowhere near as scary to the constituents as the fear of change and the unknown. Recently, our institution implemented a new travel & expense system that would systematize the entry and processing of all travel and expense related items at the university. This system, at face value, would provide the administration with an efficient and accurate way to process the thousands of expense reports submitted each month. It would also enable users to utilize their smart phones and use an Expedia-like travel site for booking flights. I was very excited to be a part of this project and was certain it would be a ringing success – and it was – until we started training some of the more seasoned members of the community – that is where the implementation started to go slightly awry and it required me to take a step back and review what it would mean to lead the community through this change.

There are several key aspects that should be noted about the implementation from my perspective:

1. This was completely new technology for most of the community and some of our members were not as technically savvy as others.
2. The new system was rule driven – that is, the rules are predefined and hard coded – any previous “workarounds” that people had been using in the past would no longer be viable – people would be forced to “follow the rules.” This presented a major change to some who had been bypassing policies/procedures for many, many years.

3. There were well over 1,000 people that needed to be trained and made to feel comfortable with using the system – and these people were of all different skillsets. This would require the ability to adapt the trainings, presentations and discussions to meet the needs of the group in training. This would require flexibility and willingness to move away from the script when necessary.

There are obviously some other issues that were presented, but these were the major tests to my leadership skills as I saw them. Another issue was that none of the people I trained reported to me or had a stake in whether or not the implementation was successful – if our implementation failed, they would just go back to paper expense reports and the current way of doing business – which for some would have been just fine. This presented a challenge in that I had to get the community on board and excited – really sell the benefits of the system while demonstrating how to utilize the features to a group where the excitement level ranged from very high to not interested at all!

While dealing with the challenge, I believe that I had to employ several traits of the key leaders we studied in class and will try to relate those traits back to the readings and also provide examples on how select exemplars may have handled the situation or acted in a similar manner.
**Ability to bring consensus/common understanding:** As I mentioned above, at the start of this implementation we were dealing with many levels of technology skills as well as many levels of fear of change. It was important to make sure that with each group I could provide the training and impart the system knowledge in such a way that it made sense to them and their particular line of business. While we did many open sessions across the university, I also worked with the leaders in each of the schools and colleges to try and schedule school and role specific sessions so that we could really target commonalities and comfort levels. This was the first step in leveling the playing field and alleviating some of the fears of the end users. Next, I created scenarios for these groups that would make sense, for example – for faculty sessions in the school of business, we would talk about creating an expense report that would cover expenses obtained on an Accounting related conference. For the institutional advancement department, we would review expenses that were incurred as a result of fundraising dinners with major donors. These small steps were used to bring the large scary parts of the system down to a meaningful, understandable level for each group of users. I also needed earn the trust of the end users so that they would not be so leery when using the system. To do so, I tried to use humor to ease their concerns. I have found that if you can make people laugh – whether at you, the scenario or at least find some small way to get their buy in with a humor, you can usually get them on board to at least try something new and hopefully succeed.

I would tie this trait into what we have learned about Eleanor Roosevelt and her personality in dealing with adversity and others along the way. She showed people that she was real, that she was a functioning part of the community. As a leader, that is important. To gain trust, you have to trust – you have to bend – you have to learn that you can’t always just force others to do what you want, that sometimes you have to find the best way to approach them and
meet them in the middle. I feel that Mrs. Roosevelt embodied this tactic and serves as a good example for me in my dealings with others on how I can build consensus rather than trying to push my opinions off on others. Lastly, she showed patience, which is often hard to do in any situation, but her willingness to sit back and listen and reflect – and not have to be at the center of attention – showed that often, class and perseverance are keys to achieving your end result. I think these are key traits to employ while training users as well – you can’t just run through the presentation and not address any questions put forth by the group.

Looking at these qualities, one can see that patience, trustworthiness and the ability to bring common ground to the group are key success factors for me in the current situation. During the implementation, it was imperative to be patient with users and try to understand their basis and also to demonstrate my knowledge of the system to earn their trust.

**Culture-changer/role-changer:** Implementing this new system meant a major change to the current business practices at the university, whether formal or informally utilized. While the underlying process – take a trip – collect receipts – submit expenses – get paid – would remain intact, the application would require a change to the culture in many areas. In many departments, faculty and staff were used to having administrators complete the expense reports on their behalf – and many approvers were used to someone else in the financial budget authorization channel approving the reports on their behalf. In some cases, approvers had added unnecessary reviewers to the workflow simply because they could and in other cases it would seem that policy was not being followed at all! To change the culture we endured some tough battles with faculty and administration. Prior to the training sessions and go live, I spent time working with many business managers, department chairs and departmental administrators to
determine their current processes and help review how they would transition into the new environment. I spent time understanding their concerns and developing documentation, workflows and training plans to help alleviate those concerns. Being prepared and showing an understanding of the system and the needs of the constituents were key factors to success.

I would tie these traits into and relate them back to Derek Bok, prior President of Harvard University. While these specific changes affected one system, they were part of a much larger financial administrative plan for the university. To come to the decision to implement, our office had to first review the common issues faced by the members of the community and propose various ways to resolve them for the good of the majority of stakeholders at the institution. Through his writings, Bok questioned the purpose of the university, and the role played by leadership within the institution. He also brought to life the role and power of the administrative branch of the institution and presented ways in which these leaders could utilize their authority to work with the community to make improvements to research and scholarship.

In his writing, The Purposes of the University, Bok indicates that academic leaders need to make the determination as to what activities/opportunities are important and relevant to the needs of the community. They should do so without overburdening their faculty and administrative staff. They should not ask their employees to take on meaningless tasks that will add nothing to the culture or benefit the University in some way. (p.87) While Bok’s writings were more tied to academic opportunities and what could be done to serve the interests of the University without serving the leadership’s own political interests, I can relate this back to the undertaking of implementing the new travel and expense system in that we had also reviewed what was important and determined that this change was needed for our culture. We, as
administrators, needed to show that we were committed to providing faculty and staff with quick turnaround on their submissions so that they could receive their reimbursements in a timely manner. This would help to change the current culture and unrest where people were often waiting several weeks for their money to be returned.

**Persuasive, Perseverance and Passionate** – In learning more about President Lincoln and the opposition he faced and support he garnered during the Civil War, and pertaining to this paper, when delivering the Emancipation Proclamation, it is easy to see that persuasion and passion are key elements needed when attempting to change the status quo. Among the many, many traits that Lincoln possessed, dedicated, analytical, self-aware and brilliance, just to name a few, I feel that these two traits are what I can relate to mostly in the situation which I have been describing. When Lincoln presented the Emancipation Proclamation to Congress, he was met with mixed reviews – and even some of those that he would have considered allies turned against him and what they felt was asking too much. Lincoln was not compromising in his requests – he had an agenda and needed to stick with it and see his mission through to the end.

Later, after Lincoln had hosted a delegation of freed slaves to the White House and informed them of his beliefs and agenda for slavery, he was able to convince those in attendance to overcome their hostility and look at the advantages that would be afforded in a post-slavery world. Lincoln was able to persuade those that he came into contact with what the benefits would be and bring them around to his way of thinking. (p. 471) This of course, was questioned and many other prominent black leaders did not agree and criticized Lincoln for his beliefs and expectations as to what freedom would mean to a nation and how it could be undertaken. Lincoln did not let this stop him! He continued to focus on the Proclamation and
promote his expectations. He looked for ways to “soften the impact” (p. 471) but he did not relent.

In looking at my own situation through the lens of Lincoln and the traits which he exemplified, it is clear that to be a good leader; you should be passionate about the change first and foremost. When providing the training on the new system and working with the various groups, it was important to appear positive in the face of the opposition. Though many were not happy and had strong opinions as to why the implementation would fail – it was very important for me and the rest of the implementation team to appear wholly committed to the project and provide a shining outlook on the future – to focus on the benefits but also acknowledge their apprehension. By acknowledging their apprehension, it would again, allow us all to relate to each other and provide for the ability to find some common ground.

It is also important to persevere. As mentioned above, there were many that were not happy about the implementation and voiced those concerns up the chain of command. As the administrators, it was important for us to continue to point out the benefits of the system with every chance we had. It was also important not to let the implementation fail simply because of an unhappy group. We had to be resilient in our dealings with the community – some days were better than others and some groups were more receptive than others – it was just the nature of the implementation and we needed to be prepared for all kinds of situations. I think this trait is demonstrated in many leaders – the ability to alter delivery based upon the audience, while remaining true to the original message. Often, there were days that we would wrap up a training session in frustration, leaving more questions open than had actually been answered. Sometimes we had people who were openly hostile in the meetings. On one occasion, we had one faculty
member get up and leave. While on those days, I would go home shaking my head, I would also use them as learning experiences and incorporate those questions into future presentations and training sessions. For the faculty member that walked out, I did reach out to her personally and try to make a connection – so that at least we could make an attempt at “winning her over” on the system.

The traits we have listed in class are manifested in a leader over and over in so many ways. I find that as a leader, whether of a team or leading a community through a change, you have to be passionate about the change first. It is often transparent if you do not believe in the ideals or changes you are putting forth. How can you lead others into change if you are working on a cause or in an area in which you have little belief or understanding? A good leader will also look internally first, develop their convictions and then continue to learn and develop those beliefs as they gain more knowledge and feedback from the community. These traits manifested themselves over and over in the exemplars studied in class. I feel that Eleanor Roosevelt provides a terrific example of how to quietly lead, how to gain acceptance from a group that may not accept you immediately and how to be self-deprecating when needed. As a university administrator, I think that Derek Bok provided great examples on how to review higher education administration and make determinations about how to move forward and make changes within the organization that would benefit both the administration and the academics.

While the leaders all prove to be terrific role models, so many traits of leadership seem to be exemplified, in my opinion, in Lincoln. He provides for a great model of leadership behavior – whether you are in a political role or not. Though he was leading a nation, I feel that one can take so much away from his actions and writings. The best quote that I found during this
research is about Lincoln and his role as a politician first and foremost. First, Elihu Root (1920) goes on to talk about how the negative connotation of politicians should not always be what we focus on when considering a person as a politician. The next few lines, Root goes on to say that someone like Lincoln studied, learned and exercised the art of politics so as to bring the consensus of the multitude of opinions into order so that a prevailing opinion could be demonstrated and then expressed and accepted. This is truly the mark of a leader who is democratic and ethical.

References:


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