

by David Limardi, Carol Morrison, and Daven Morrison

Know Thyself: Judgment Capability Factors

“Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, ESSAYS, “SELF-RELIANCE,” 1841

Leadership comes in many styles, and history is full of examples when a leader’s judgment was a critical part in the success or failure of an initiative. An example people have come to admire is the leadership and judgment of Abraham Lincoln. To understand Lincoln and his capacity to act on the basis of sound judgment, it is helpful to understand his context.

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is the location of ICMA’s annual Senior Executive Institute. Participants focus on the leadership of Lincoln during the Civil War. Attendees walk the battlefields and discuss Lincoln and the generals, reflecting on successes, failures, and actions that changed the course of history.

Institute attendees visit Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg National Military Park and stand where Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863. He was there to make “a few appropriate remarks” on the day the cemetery was dedicated. Edward Everett, a former president of Harvard University and renowned orator, followed Lincoln. Lincoln gave his brief Gettysburg Address, only 10 sentences long. Everett spoke for two hours and spoke 13,607 words.

Which speech had the greatest impact on our national consciousness is evident. What was it about Lincoln’s judgment and how he approached decision making that allowed his brief message to resound through generations and have such a profound impact? And direct to our work as public management professionals,

how does his example relate to our current need to see complex issues accurately, tolerate inherent conflict, deal with ambiguity in a competent way, and speak from a position of understanding in a way that engages an organizational team, an elected body, and a citizenry?

Looking back on the time Lincoln presided over the Union, we can see clearly that he possessed sound judgment as he navigated the many crises of the Civil War. The resources in his team allowed him to make sound decisions despite enormous pressures. There were also critical resources that were unique to him.

In today's challenging environment, with simultaneous demands for control and release, delicacy and power, the public management professional must take note of the importance of what sound judgment is. The manager, like President Lincoln, will need to be aware of the resources in the leadership team and in the manager's own individual personality.

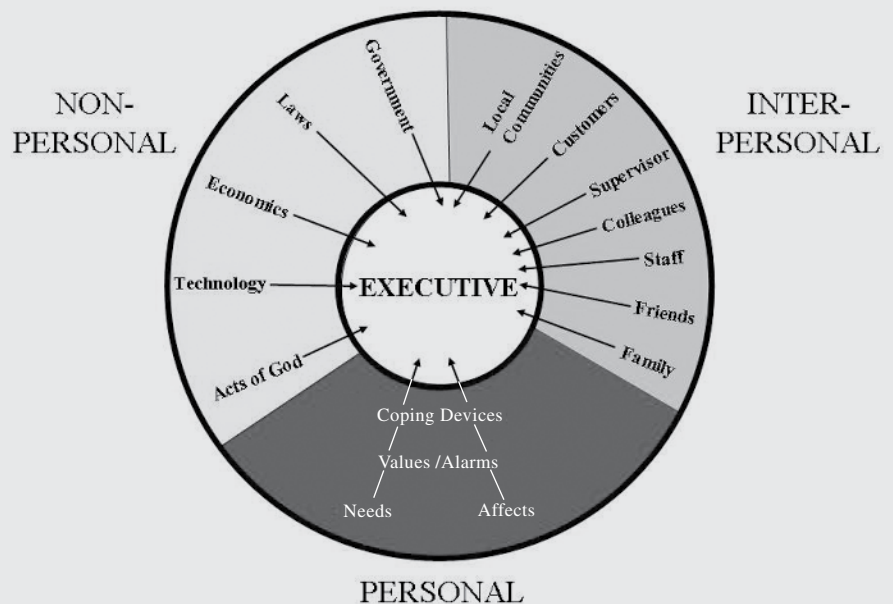
Modern understanding of the mind and the brain has allowed us to add many new and powerful tools to the resources Lincoln had. These tools allow a leader to secure information with integrity. Trusting a gut instinct or a superficial program or assessment process is dangerous. The wise leader gains an added edge from understanding distilled from objective and actionable information.

BEYOND EXPERIENCE AND GUT INSTINCT: LEVERAGING OBJECTIVE INPUT TO GAIN AN EXTRA ADVANTAGE

Beginning more than 30 years ago, the Morrison team and city managers tackled the problem of balance.¹ Proactive managers recognized the need to understand the stresses caused by working in a so-called fishbowl. Pressures intruding on a manager from professional work along with pressures from the community and the family as well as unmet individual needs compounded the frustration of

Figure 1.

EXECUTIVE RESPONSIBILITIES & PRESSURES



many managers (see Figure 1).

Multiple solutions were provided for the manager, one of which included a week-long seminar by the Menninger Foundation that addressed these pressures and provided concepts and methods that were actionable. During that week, managers were given the opportunity to talk to a psychiatrist at length and in depth on any topic.

Having an opportunity to talk about these three important arenas—

non-personal, interpersonal, and very personal—and to understand how they competed and complemented other parts of the leaders' lives helped the leaders to integrate. Through integration came a sense of mastery and, in some, confidence and improved decision making. For an individual manager, there was ease and satisfaction. For the manager's organization, there was more efficiency. As the individuals became stronger, so did their organizations.

David Morrison took this experience with the managers and developed an individual consultation service for executives. Through that consultation, executives came to realize they were most effective when they understood their own unique personalities. They learned to adapt to the needs of their teams, to their organization, and to the mission they were assigned.²

Being in tune with the leadership team as a group and with each individual is one of the most fundamental and critical challenges of the public management professional. Knowing when to dive into the details of a problem and

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when to be patient for the work to be completed is a critical challenge not only for the leadership team, but also for all elected officials and the larger community as well.

Among the myriad of work demands, how do managers gauge their relative alignment with the key people who influence the direction of an organization? How does a manager obtain objective and actionable information?

Most managers have experienced the instant feedback when an action has proven entirely wrong. Experience is a critical resource to the manager. Yet it is subjective. Others are familiar with surveys, and a smaller group is familiar with executive assessment tools that include 360-degree feedback.

These tools and processes for assessing managers are becoming more common in the workplace and will be impacting more individuals, leaders, and teams in the future as more reliable data are gathered. For the past 15 to 20 years, most leadership development has focused on competencies. Defining competencies helps to understand Lincoln.

Biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin,³ while speaking at the 2007 ICMA annual conference in Pittsburgh, related that Lincoln's capacity to lead in difficult times was directly related to specific core competencies, which led to actions rooted in good judgment. Kearns Goodwin noted that Lincoln had the capacity to:

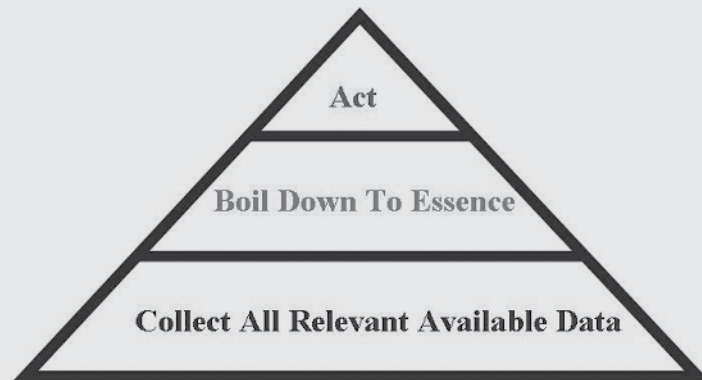
- Learn on the job.
- Share credit for success.
- Understand his personal strengths and weaknesses.
- Control his emotions.
- Relax and replenish.
- Go to battle.
- Communicate ideas and convictions.
- Compete at the right times.
- Listen to different points of view.

Yet most tools, including 360-degree feedback tools, are subjective. Even Lincoln at various points in his career would have had poor 360

Figure 2.

JUDGMENT

From Leopold Bellak, M.D.



reviews. How would a rival or an opponent of Lincoln rate him on this set of competencies in 1863? He was tall and gangly, had a high squeaky voice, and frequently conceded points early in debates.

He also had a history of disabling depression. These are objective data points that might be insurmountable in today's political environment. Today, the challenge to be objective still remains.

A MODEL OF JUDGMENT

Getting objective data is difficult when assessing people. In medicine, for example, a fever can be caused by many things: infection, autoimmune disease, or even cancer. Assuming one treatment is correct because it feels "like the last time" can be disastrous without objective data. Treating a new fever based on gut or experience is unprofessional.

Adding objective measurement helps refine the cause of the fever and therefore the treatment. In regard to leadership, the most important element to measure, we believe, is judgment. Psychiatrist Leopold Bellak, in his study of the causes of poor decisions, uncovered overload as a factor. Dr. Bellak found one common problem was *too much information coming too fast to properly collect all the information.*

This explains part of the poor deci-

sions in the modern workplace: the e-mail sent too quickly, the gossip about the department head shared too easily, the promise made too readily to the elected official. Instead, if a person gathers as much of the relevant data as possible, boils the data down to a core set of information, and then acts, overload and bad decisions can often be minimized.

We model this process as a triangle in Figure 2 to emphasize the relative importance in size from one step to the next. Lincoln's tactics fit this model of good judgment. In his address at Gettysburg, he spoke directly to the current crisis, to the moment of remembering the fallen, and to the broader and long-term challenge within which the crisis fell. These were not off-the-cuff remarks but ideas and issues he had been wrestling with for months and, in the case of the cause of the war, years.

For a variety of reasons this is unfortunately not the typical process used in many organizations. One senior manager commented when he saw the model: "Well, no, the typical process here is to reverse the triangle: act, then collect information to rationalize the action."

It is possible to measure elements with proven objective tests that allow insight into judgment of the leader and the management team. For 30 years, Morrison Associates has been

evaluating executives—more than 1,500 altogether—many of whom have been senior-level leaders. Over time, a core set of elements has been found to be helpful in understanding the raw, objective elements of judgment:

- Tolerance of ambiguity.
- Perception of task versus relationship.
- Flexibility of thinking.
- Use of practical knowledge to solve problems.
- Ability to predict the interpersonal environment.
- Capacity to think in abstractions.
- Emotional energy level.
- Hyper-competitiveness.
- Need for psychological nurturance.
- Harsh standards.
- Excess self-reliance.
- Sensitivity to shame.
- Tendency toward impulsivity.

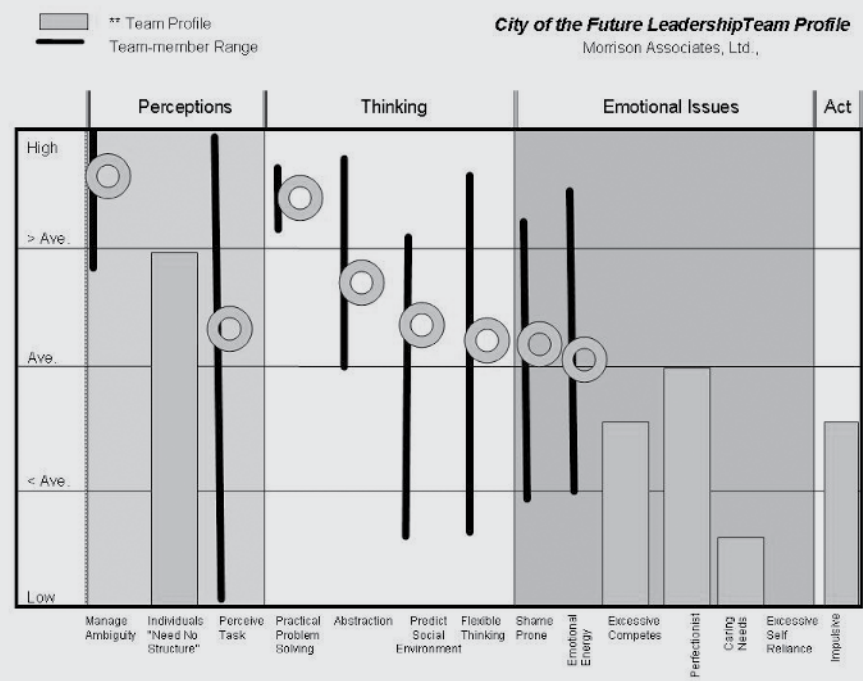
USING THE OBJECTIVE DATA FOR A LEADERSHIP TEAM

Figure 3 is an adaptation of a real team assessment. The results are for a city manager, Claire Malone, and her team of 12 department heads. The figure summarizes the combined scores of all team members and Claire on various proven assessment tools. For measurements that fall on a scale (for example *flexible thinking*), the result has an average and a range. For measurements that are “either-or” (for example, perfectionistic), the result is shown in percentages.

Looking at this team, managers need to note several areas. Focusing on two items, “Perfectionist” and “Manage Ambiguity,” helps educate the leader on potential traps for the team and for leading it. Because the team is strong (“High”) in its capacity to manage ambiguity, the leader will in general need to watch to not over-clarify directions with individuals.

Claire will be at risk of micromanaging if she intrudes too much into her subordinates’ work. With the team members, she will do well to give a general direction and then step aside and be prepared to remove obstacles and clarify as needed.

Figure 3. Combined Team Judgment Profile.



Complicating this is the fact that almost 50 percent of the team is made up of individuals vulnerable to being harsh in their judgments or wanting perfection. Claire will need to watch that team members are not missing opportunities to complete a task because they want to do so “without a mistake”; she also must be careful that her team members are not excessively critical of the work of their peers. The team may also burn through staff as team members set unreachable goals or create a passive team as they take back work because they think, “I might as well do it myself.”

These are particularly rough waters to navigate with a fractured supervising board that may co-opt team members while it also determines the budget. A split or fractured board in budget season is fertile ground for harsh judgments and demands of perfection. Internal research at Morrison Associates shows that the trait of seeking perfection is present in more than 60 percent of highly successful CEOs. They were successful because they learned to self-manage.

CEOs can be compared successfully with public management professionals. They supervise team members who carry out complex functions

and who are technically competent but who have the vulnerability (as do direct reports of CEOs) to think only of their own unit. Also like CEOs, local government managers report to boards, which are extremely difficult groups to have as supervisors.

THE FIT OF THE LEADER WITH HIS OR HER TEAM

Adding the leader’s profile in Figure 4 helps a team understand the leader in an objective way and facilitates dialogue and support for the leader and the leader’s efforts. In Claire’s case, she does very well in ambiguity and also seeks perfection in work. The critical factors that relate to the team also relate to Claire.

As we step back to see the forest, it is pleasant to note the relative diversity represented by the broad team profile. Claire’s strengths can be leveraged and team members’ differing strengths can also be leveraged. The ability to work with and understand fellow team members is a gift that can be gained through a process like this. Michael Apter, a prominent psychologist, has described this as “psychodiversity.”

When leveraged, this psychodiversity can make a team highly re-

Calendar of Events

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September 11 1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m. ET

Audioconference: *Implementing Balanced Scorecard in Performance Management: Lessons from Miami-Dade County*

September 21-24

ICMA 2008 Annual Conference, Richmond, VA

September 21

Prevention Programs: *Proven Strategies for Achieving Results A Local Government Management Seminar*, Richmond, Virginia

October 1

ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing Program, Application Deadline

October 16 1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m. ET

Audioconference: *A Whole New Mind²: Using the Work of Daniel Pink to Move Our Organizations into the Conceptual Age*

November 13 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. ET

Audioconference: *Customer Service and 311/CRM Technology in Local Governments*

UPCOMING IN 2009

February 12-13

Leading Practices Conference: *"A Whole New Mind—Moving Our Communities from the Informational to the Conceptual,"* Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC

Young Leadership Professional Institute

March 4-5, Savannah, GA

March 18-19, Jersey City, NJ

April 1-2, Oak Brook, IL

April 15-16, Boulder, CO

ICMA Regional Summits

March 5-6, Southeast, Savannah, GA

March 19-20, Northeast, Jersey City, NJ

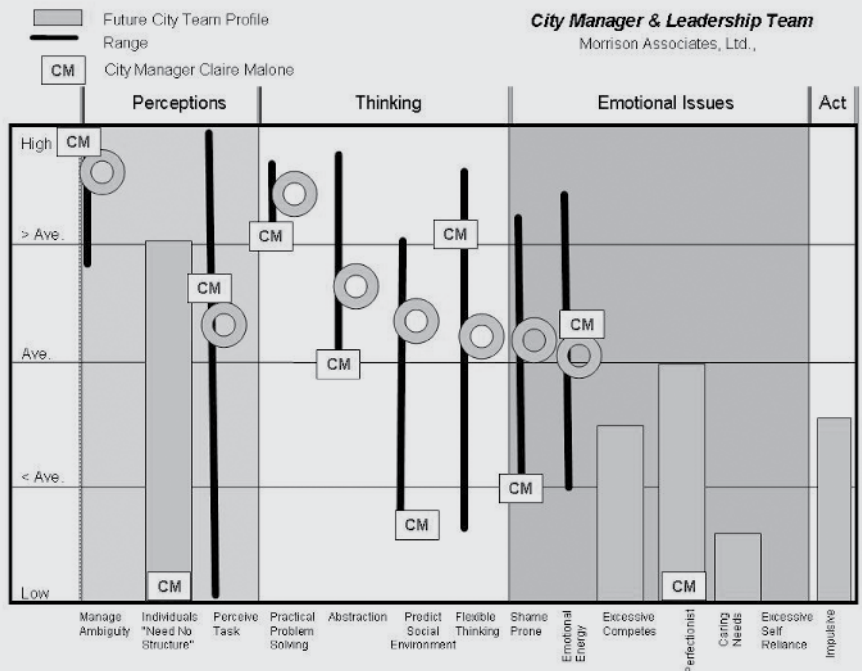
April 2-3, Midwest, Oak Brook, IL

April 16-17, Mountain Plains / West Coast, Boulder, CO

April 25-May 2

ICMA SEI, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

Figure 4. Team and Leader Judgment Profiles.



silent. Teams can learn this as well, as Lincoln's team did. The internal competition, the "egos" on Lincoln's team, were tremendously challenging, as many historians have noted. Doris Kearns Goodwin highlights this with a particular emphasis on Lincoln's courage to include strong opponents from the other party in his cabinet. The spirit and meaning of the Gettysburg Address is one example of what a strong team and leader can accomplish.

The Gettysburg experience was powerful and personally sustaining. Being at the place where Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, surrounded by all those white gravestones of heroes who died in the Civil War, stokes the fire that resides in the innermost recesses of one's soul and explains a passion for public service. Lincoln was not on a quest for immortality that day in 1863. He was merely there to make "a few appropriate remarks." But through his words and actions, we are reminded of the importance of sound judgment and the legacy it can leave. **PM**

¹David E. Morrison, "Focus on the Family." *Public Management*, March, 1976.

²David E. Morrison, "Stress and the

Public Administrator," *Public Management Forum*, July/August 1977.

³Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

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