Leadership Skills

GUIDING QUESTION: What kinds of leadership qualities do successful presidents have?

When the Founders wrote the Constitution, they thought that Congress, not the president, would lead the nation. At best, the president was to be the nation’s chief administrator and, in time of war, its commander in chief. Instead, the powers and duties of the president have grown steadily over the years. Public opinion surveys clearly show that Americans look to the president to keep the peace and to solve economic and social problems.

Every president has a unique style of leadership. Sometimes presidents demonstrate leadership by introducing bold new policies; President Truman did this in 1948 when he announced measures to end discrimination against African Americans in the military. More often, presidents demonstrate leadership by responding to crises, problems, or opportunities as they occur.

Understanding the Public A president must know and understand the American people. The most successful presidents have a genuine feel for the hopes, fears, and moods of the nation. Understanding the people is necessary to gain and hold their support.

Public support, in turn, can give a president real leverage in influencing lawmakers. Since Congress is a representative body, it is very sensitive to the amount of public support a president can generate. When a president is popular, presidential proposals and policies are better received by Congress than when the public holds a president in low regard. Failure to understand the public mood can prove disastrous for a president. In 1932, when the nation was mired in the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover believed that the public did not want government to take an active role in confronting the nation’s economic problems. Actually, with millions out of work, Americans wanted their problems solved by any means, including federal intervention. President Hoover’s failure to understand people’s attitude cost him the presidency. In 1932 he lost the presidential election to the Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, by a large majority of votes, a landslide.

Ability to Communicate A leading expert has said, “Presidential power is the power to persuade.” Successful presidents must be able to communicate effectively and to present their ideas in a way that inspires public support. President Hoover was considered “out of touch” with the people as the economy started to crumble at the beginning of the Great Depression. He met infrequently with the press and answered only questions that were written in advance. In contrast, President Roosevelt was a master at communicating with the public. He held weekly press conferences during which he answered all questions. After his famous “fireside chats” over the radio, Roosevelt received as many as 50,000 letters of public support per week.

Modern presidents often use a strategy of “going public” to appeal directly to voters. President Ronald Reagan became known as “the Great Communicator” because of his ability to sell his ideas to the public. A former actor, he had a very relaxed demeanor, soothing voice, and practiced sense of timing during speeches and debates. Reagan also had a keen sense of humor and spoke optimistically and simply about his vision for America. He made the public feel as if they knew him. These communication skills were essential to his success as a candidate and a president, especially in times of crisis.

Sense of Timing A successful president must know when to introduce a new policy, make a key decision, or delay action. During the crisis in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, President George H.W. Bush agreed that American economic aid would encourage democratic reforms there.
Tracking Presidential Communications

At the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, radio was a relatively new phenomenon. Roosevelt used it masterfully to communicate his ideas to the general public. In a similar way, Ronald Reagan was skilled at communicating through televised speeches and debates. Today's presidents also use newer technologies to communicate with the people.

Explore the president's presence on social media and on the White House webpage. Note what digital technologies the president uses to convey ideas and to elicit support for programs and policies.

EXPLORING THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Examining Track a variety of posts and feeds in those forums and report about the president's use of technology over the course of two or three days. What issues or public policies receive priority? What does the president want you to know or think about these issues? Do you think the president is an effective communicator? Give examples to support your reasons.

President Bush decided to delay acting on this policy, however, until the Soviet political situation was clearer and more stable. On the other hand, when some former Soviet republics declared their independence, Bush was quick to recognize their sovereignty.

Skillful presidents often use their assistants or cabinet secretaries to test the timing of new policy initiatives. They might deliberately leak information or have a cabinet secretary or an aide make a statement about a policy under consideration. Public response to the issue may influence whether the president pursues, delays, or quietly drops a policy initiative.

Ability to Compromise Good leadership requires the capacity to be flexible and open to new ideas. A successful president must also be able to compromise. The nature of politics is such that even the president must be willing to give up something to get something in return. Presidents who are successful leaders are able to recognize that sometimes they must settle for legislation that provides only part of the programs they want. Presidents who will not compromise risk accomplishing nothing at all.

A famous dispute at the end of World War I between President Woodrow Wilson and the Congress is often cited as an example of a president refusing to compromise and losing everything in the end.

Wilson had represented the nation at the Paris Peace Conference negotiations to end the war. He lobbied the other nations involved with the goal was to prevent war. When the treaty came before the Senate for ratification, many senators opposed it. They did not want permanent ties of
any kind to Europe and its problems. They specifically objected that the League of Nations plan would take away the right of Congress to declare war. (The League called for members to take collective action against any aggressor nation.)

Faced with these objections, President Wilson still refused to modify the treaty. Wilson faced a significant problem, however: If changes were made to the treaty to please the Senate, it would also have to be renegotiated with foreign powers. An angry Wilson decided to go on a public speaking tour to build support for the treaty. The tour ended suddenly when Wilson suffered a stroke. The Senate rejected the treaty, and the United States never joined the League of Nations. It did join the successor organization, the United Nations, in 1945.

**Political Courage** Successful presidents need political courage because sometimes they must go against public opinion to do what they think is best. It takes courage to make decisions that will be unpopular.

President Abraham Lincoln made this kind of decision during the Civil War. The early years of the war went very badly for the North—despite some Union victories, casualties were very high, and the war’s end seemed nowhere in sight. As time passed, the war became increasingly unpopular, and the president came under intense public and political pressure to negotiate peace. Despite his belief that his decision would mean his defeat in the 1864 election, however, Lincoln chose to continue the war to preserve the Union.

At times, presidents have shown leadership and courage by going against the traditional views of their own political parties. For example, prior to becoming president, Republican Richard Nixon’s congressional career and term as Dwight D. Eisenhower’s vice president were built around being an ardent anti-Communist. In that context, it was amazing that Nixon became the first president to visit the communist nation of People’s Republic of China. His efforts to open diplomatic relations with China surprised many people, especially members of his own party. Similarly, many people did not expect President Bill Clinton, a Democrat whose party traditionally supported the welfare system, to sign Republican legislation reforming the system after he had vetoed two previous bills and faced strong opposition within his own party.

**READIMG PROGRESS CHECK**

**Evaluating** Which leadership skills are most important for a president to have? Explain your reasoning.

**LESSON 4 REVIEW**

**Reviewing Vocabulary**

1. **Defining** What does *landslide* mean in the context of elections? What is another meaning of *landslide*? 21A

**Using Your Graphic Organizer**

2. **Listing** Using your completed graphic organizer, rank the presidential leadership skills in order from most important to least important. Explain your decisions.

**Answering the Guiding Questions**

3. **Describing** What are the formal and informal qualifications to be president?

4. **Explaining** What kinds of leadership qualities do successful presidents have?

**Writing About Government**

5. **Narrative** If you wanted to be president, what decisions can you make now and in the next few years to help you get elected later? What type of education, work experience, and leadership skills can you work toward? Do you have any personal characteristics that could help you win the election and do a good job? Write a personal reflection that answers these questions. 21D