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## Lessons on Leadership in Turbulent Times from Doris Kearns Goodwin

By Anthony Rebora

“I like to believe that the stories of our past leaders are not just remnants of yester year,” Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin said in her General Session address Sunday morning at the ASCD Empower19 conference.

Instead, these stories must be “told and retold” to remind us how we, as a nation, have overcome great adversity in the past—and to help us understand the dispositions we need to face challenges in our own time.

These lessons are particularly important for educators, who can be influential leaders in their own right and who play a central role in shaping the next generation. Goodwin noted that one of her sons is a teacher in Concord, Mass., so she understands on a personal level the impact teachers can have and the effort they put into their work.

In her address, Goodwin highlighted ideas from her most recent book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, in which she explores the leadership traits of four transformational presidents—Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Goodwin said she that came up with the title of the book five years ago, but acknowledged that it seems to have new relevance today as we face growing political turmoil and rapid technological change.

In studying these presidents, Goodwin said that while she “found no master key for leadership,” she did identify a “family resemblance of leadership strengths, habits, and patterns of behavior which I believe are relevant to leaders in any field.” These traits include:

1. Ability to grow through adversity, humility, and empathy.
2. Self-confidence to surround yourself with strong-minded people who may differ from you.
3. Capacity to inspire and motivate others and create a culture of respect.
4. Readiness to take full responsibility and shoulder the blame.
5. Willingness to transcend past slights and resentments.

6. Approachability and facility in establishing direct connections with others.
7. Talent for communicating simply and directly, especially through stories.
8. Ability to control negative and unproductive emotions.
9. Taking time to think, relax, and replenish.
10. Capacity to transform ambition for self into ambition for a greater good.

In reference to this last principle in particular, Goodwin said all four of these presidents—or “my guys,” as she frequently referred to them—“would tell us that it’s up to us, as historians, as teachers, as administrators, as citizens, to heal our divisions, to recreate that sense of common duty and experience.”

Referring to Lincoln’s belief in the importance of molding public sentiment, Goodwin suggested educators have an especially important leadership calling. “All of you here today play such a huge role in helping to mold the sentiments of each new generation—an awesome responsibility,” she said.

“There’s nothing more important than that next generation making our country and healing us a little better,” she said.

To give them that potential, it is essential to hold onto and share the stories of those who came before us, whether private individuals or great public figures.

***Doris Kearns Goodwin** is a world-renowned presidential historian, public speaker, and Pulitzer Prize-winning and best-selling author. Well known for her appearances and commentary on television, Goodwin is seen frequently on major television and cable networks and shows, including Meet the Press, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, and many others.*

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