

# Doris Kearns Goodwin Identifies 4 Traits of Effective Leaders

by Madeline Patton

Responding to a question from the audience at the American Association of Community Colleges Convention, Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin identified four traits of successful leaders. Kearns Goodwin was the plenary speaker April 11 in Boston.

Goodwin said community college leaders could learn from the work practices employed by each of the four U.S. presidents about whom she has written: Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Though the four had quite different leadership styles, she said the traits they had in common contributed to their effectiveness.

The exemplary leadership qualities she identified are:

- **Quiet Confidence.** It is essential “because things will always go bad” and one needs the inner serenity to get through tough times, she said, referring to Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was asked at the height of World War II about how he slept at night. Roosevelt explained that when he made decisions he sought the best information available, and that even if he later learned that he was mistaken he could live with the outcome. So, she advised her audience to put “everything you have into a decision and then let it go.” It also helps if one has assembled a capable staff that gathers the best information available to support decisions and otherwise compensates for one’s weaknesses.
- **Willingness to Learn from Mistakes.** When Johnson was Senate Majority Leader he gathered his staff each day to ask how they had used their time and whether there were things that he or they should have been done differently.

While Kearns Goodwin allowed that daily staff critiques might be a bit excessive, she pointed out that acknowledging mistakes and learning from them is essential for effective leaders.

- **Excellent Communication Skills.** Each of the presidents she has studied “mastered the media of their time,” she said. Lincoln was adept at oratory, Roosevelt commanded via radio, and Kennedy excelled on television. Johnson’s strength was one-on-one communication, particularly when negotiating. All four men, she noted, loved good storytelling. They also recognized that crafting speeches takes time. Kearns Goodwin said it is a fallacy that Lincoln wrote *The Gettysburg Address* on the train to Pennsylvania. Lincoln routinely would not see people for several days before major addresses so he could write. Given this model of concentration, Kearns Goodwin recommended that leaders allow themselves time to work out their ideas and to write major speeches.
- **The Ability to Replenish Oneself through Relaxation.** Roosevelt took periodic boat rides out of Washington, D.C., and had a daily cocktail hour at the Whitehouse. The primary rule for guests at the cocktail hour was that no one could talk about the war or work. Roosevelt’s preferred topics of conversation were books, movies and gossip. Kearns Goodwin said her point was that people need time away from the pressure of work to think and to gain perspective.