



Lessons from David C. Lincoln

WHEN I LAST SPOKE WITH DAVID C. LINCOLN, WE WERE IN HIS STUDY REGARDING HIS DOG AND BEST BUDDY, PEPPER. David told me, “You know, I calculated Pepper’s age in dog years, and he’s exactly the same age as me, 92.” With a twinkle in his eye and a wry smile, he continued, “So, there you have it, two elderly guys the same age, happy to be living under the same roof, sharing meals together, enjoying each other’s company . . . both with bladder control issues.”

This was characteristic of David’s generosity. Rather than skirt his obvious health issues, he lightened the conversation with humor, putting me at ease and opening the space for the more meaningful, lengthy conversation that followed.

It is with immense sadness that we mark the passing of David Lincoln—founder, architect, chairman, and spiritual leader of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. David’s importance to this organization is impossible to capture in words. He was the visionary who saw the need to launch original research and to train and assist others who understood the central role of land in driving economic and social progress. He forged this vision in bricks and mortar 44 years ago when he founded the Lincoln Institute that we know today.

In the brief four years that I knew David, I learned valuable lessons. I will share some of them here.

It isn’t hard to do well while doing good.

For David, life was a positive-sum game. One’s needs can be met while leaving more

on the table for others. One could accomplish this by subscribing to a simple principle, the Golden Rule. Although David was a leader of industry, inventor, humanitarian, philanthropist, father, and teacher, to us at the Lincoln Institute, he was a mensch—a man of integrity and honor who didn’t just talk about the Golden Rule, he lived and breathed the ethical code he inherited from his father, John C. Lincoln (1866–1959).

In David’s words:

My father’s core ethical principle was to treat people as you would like to be treated. This implied the following precepts:

Treat people with absolute fairness. *This means all people. In business, it includes all the constituents of a company—employees, customers, owners, and the community. In society, it means government must treat individuals fairly, and vice versa.*

Whoever creates something should be entitled to keep it. *Receiving the fruits of someone else’s labor—a windfall—often occurs. But for each windfall there is a wipeout—someone doesn’t get all he or she produced. Both the windfall and the wipeout are unethical.*

People are important. *They should be treated with respect and dignity, not as machines or cogs in a wheel.*

—David C. Lincoln
Annual Founder’s Day Lecture,
Cambridge, MA, August 1, 1996.

David put these principles to work on a daily basis and in all of his endeavors. For example, in the companies he ran, he adopted the practice of profit-sharing with employees—a concept that was piloted at Lincoln Electric. As he explained in his 1996 Founder’s Day talk, this involved “providing a fair but not excessive dividend to shareholders and investing in new products and production methods. Beyond these costs, employees at Lincoln Electric get to keep any extra profit they produce. Recently bonuses have been about 50 to 60 percent of annual salaries.”

David understood that living ethically isn’t sufficient to generate a positive-sum game; one needs to create additional value through hard work and invention. But a commitment to ethics is necessary to ensure that the benefits of that hard work and invention are distributed fairly.

Don’t avoid difficult conversations; find a way to promote civil discourse.

David adhered to the Golden Rule, but he also understood that even such a simple ethical guideline left a lot of room for interpretation, and even conflict. To confront this challenge, he created venues where people could convene to discuss and understand various interpretations of ethical behavior, and resolve or avoid conflicts. Claremont Lincoln University (CLU)—an institution founded in 2011 by David and his wife, Joan, and Jerry Campbell—is designed to give students the opportunity to learn how to cooperate and collaborate with others who have different viewpoints. Students build solid bases of self-knowledge and then add critical but constructive engagement skills and deep understanding of key differences among religions and governments. Students learn how to respectfully explore the differences and reconcile them both intellectually and emotionally. David stated his goal for CLU simply: “I believe that if we could get people who practice religions working together, understanding each other and cooperating instead of fighting, then everybody would be better off.”

David supported other venues where students could explore and understand the importance of ethics and ethical behavior across a variety of disciplines. In 2001, David and Joan established the Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics at Arizona State University (ASU), to foster the study of ethical dilemmas in law, biomedical sciences, and spirituality. In 2005, the couple founded the Lincoln Center for Ethics in Global Management at the Thunderbird School of Global Management at ASU. In 2008, they created a permanent endowment there to support faculty, scholarships, and research efforts. For two decades, they supported the exploration of ethical behavior through the Lincoln Program in Applied Ethics at the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York. All these efforts illustrated David’s faith that civil intellectual exchange would not only lead to better understanding among participants—it would help to make a better world.



Always have goals and a plan to reach those goals, but remain open to discovery.

David was the youngest son of John C. Lincoln, the Cleveland industrialist and preacher's son who founded the Lincoln Electric company in 1895. John held 54 patents on inventions that included arc welders, variable-speed electric motors, and brakes for streetcars. His inventions helped to build the industries and cities that established the United States' global economic and military dominance in the 20th century. David followed in his father's footsteps, serving on the board of Lincoln Electric and, among his many ventures, founding Lincoln Laser Company and Cross Spear Marble Inc., both based in Phoenix. David's ventures were guided by clear goals: to produce a product of value and to do it ethically. But it was the Lincoln Laser experience that best captured David's openness to discovery.

David and Randy Sherman founded Lincoln Laser in 1974 with a simple proposition. They wanted to use lasers to make wooden jigsaw puzzles. They began experimenting with mirrors to use in conjunction with the lasers, to help cut the wood in a jigsaw pattern. They soon realized that the combination of lasers and mirrors opened up all sorts of other possibilities. Hughes Aircraft came to the same realization and began purchasing the company's mirrors for its infrared-detecting cameras. Soon, Xerox came calling, seeing the mirrors as a solution to challenges it faced in duplicating images. Through its own process of discovery, Lincoln Laser continued to find new uses for its technology. Today, Lincoln Laser produces mirrors that are used in such disparate applications as bar code scanners, tattoo removal, biomedical imaging, navigation systems for jets, and solar cell production. David laughingly told me, "You know, we never made a jigsaw puzzle, but I bet we would've made good ones."

Meet the world where it is, not where you wish it was.

David was an aerospace engineer who trained at the California Institute of Technology. As such, he approached problems in a practical way. He was comfortable with the messiness of the world. Gravity and friction were natural obstacles to overcome, using human ingenuity. He was a little mystified by the purely theoretical worlds constructed by academics, like economists and physicists, who assumed away worldly complications in the models they constructed. Engineers like David confronted the real world with all its complications and figured out how to make things work. He couldn't understand how things that worked only in purely imaginary or theoretical contexts could apply to the real world. As he once noted, "I guess there's a value to understanding how objects move in a world without gravity or friction, but it will give me only a little insight into how things work on this planet with all its friction and dust and gravity." And he added, wryly, "Sometimes, theory guys throw the baby out with the bathwater. If you're trying to overcome gravity, you're going to need a little friction. Otherwise, how will you generate lift for your wings?"

David founded the Lincoln Institute to focus on practical things that affect the quality of life for residents of this planet. He understood that land policy often bridges theory and practice and insisted that we try to solve worldly challenges using creative approaches to the use of land.

Since he passed away, I don't feel that a light has gone out, as we sometimes do when we lose someone of true greatness. I know that the flame he lit—under notable organizations, for hundreds of family and friends, and for the thousands of people whose lives he touched—will continue illuminating our efforts to make the world a better place. Thank you, David. ☐