

## The Leader Who Won't Listen

---

Leadership involves making tough decisions that may be unpopular. But the smart leader knows the wisdom of listening before making those decisions.

---

*“Now therefore, know and consider what you will do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his household. For he is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him” (1 Sam. 25:17).*

*“Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more” (Eccl. 4:13).*



Winston Churchill once said that a nation cannot follow leaders who “keep their ears to the ground.” Which is another way of saying, effective leadership is not an exercise in reading public opinion, but in making decisions that are in the public’s best interest—whether the public appreciates it or not. The effective leader must be willing to close his ears to the clamor of the crowd and make tough calls for the greater good.

But there is a danger here. In their courage to make the hard decisions, leaders can close their minds to *all* outside counsel. Their leadership can become blind stubbornness, and no one can rescue them from the poor decisions they will make in that frame of mind.

The story of Nabal in First Samuel is a classic example of this kind of misguided leadership. As the patriarch of a large ranching operation in the Negev, Nabal had a defiant “go-it-alone” attitude that refused to acknowledge the help of others, or to assist others

who were in need. His scornful treatment of his neighbors put his family and business at grave risk. One of his young servants could instantly see what his boss could not: “He is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him.” (Ironically, Nabal was saved from the consequences of his stubbornness by his wife, Abigail, pleading with David—a leader who valued the opinions of others.)

If Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his later years, perhaps there is an autobiographical element in his observation about “an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more” (or in some translations, “who won’t take advice”). Far too many kings, presidents, CEOs, supervisors, husbands, fathers, elders, preachers, and others in leadership positions become so comfortable in their role of giving orders that they forget the wisdom of considering contrary opinions. The damage done by leaders who have closed their ears to the counsel of others is legendary. Nations lose wars, companies go bankrupt, marriages and families fall apart, churches blow up—all because those in positions of making critical decisions cannot bring themselves to consider the opinions of those under their authority.

Why do leaders lose this ability to listen? In some cases, there may be a fear of appearing weak or indecisive. The bluster is a way to maintain an image of being strong and assertive. In other cases, the leader has been in a position of unquestioned power for so long that he has lost the ability to recognize the value of his people and their contributions. Or maybe it’s just the crankiness of old age; the young whippersnappers don’t know anything anyway.

How can leaders avoid this trap? The secret lies in a character trait that can benefit all of us, regardless of the role we occupy in any social or economic structure: *humility*. Whatever our education or experience, we don’t know everything, and humility requires that we keep an open mind to the wisdom of others. There is always something new to learn, another angle to consider, an unforeseen weakness to address. The wise leader will surround himself with people who can honestly inform him of these blind spots, and thus contribute to his continuing education.

Leadership is a hard and lonely business. But we make it more difficult when we pretend to know it all and refuse to listen to those who have a stake in the decisions we make.

— David King