



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

Examining the Need for Leadership Accountability in 2nd Samuel 11–17

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Leadership accountability is essential in building trust, leading ethically, influencing followers, and fostering positive organizational outcomes. Lack of accountability leads to adverse and long-lasting effects on leaders and stakeholders. Second Samuel 11-17 provides several illustrations of consequences derived from the absence of an effective leadership model in the life and reign of King David. An analysis of this section of Scripture offers applicable recommendations for development strategies for effective organizational leadership.

King David's actions and choices in 2 Samuel 11-17 highlight common leadership missteps and consequences that can hinder the development of influential, trustworthy, and ethical leadership, ultimately obstructing the path to positive results. These

incidents depict King David's inability to embody essential qualities and behaviors linked to successful leadership. To excel as an effective and influential leader, one must fully understand and embrace their position's significant responsibilities. Otherwise, leaders who neglect these duties risk succumbing to the challenges and complexities inherent in their roles.

An essential factor in outlining and overseeing organizational goals is the ability of leaders to hold themselves accountable and to build teams that will hold each other responsible. 2 Samuel chapters 11–17 highlight the ripple effects of David's lack of accountability, demonstrating that leadership decision-making has rewards and consequences for leaders, organizations, and stakeholders. This paper highlights the need for responsible leaders by examining David's reign and exploring the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational success. 2 Samuel 11-15 provides several illustrations of leadership missteps derived from the absence of an effective leadership model that led to future and long-term consequences. An analysis of this section of Scripture offers applicable recommendations for development strategies for effective organizational leadership.

Background

As Saul's successor to the throne of Israel, David's ascension to king received much fanfare. Known as a man after God's own heart in 1 Sam. 13:14, David exuded loyalty, compassion, and kindness. The people of Israel seemed optimistic about the possibilities that abounded with David as their new king. His past reputation for success, leadership qualities, and potential for positive change provided hope for a bright future under his leadership.

Chapter 11 begins after David defeated his enemies and solidified his power and reign within the kingdom. However, this chapter also highlighted David's atypical leadership behavior and questionable character traits that should be abnormal for a leader of his caliber. First, David chose to remain home while his troops fought in battle (2 Sam. 11:1). While at home, he abused his position of power and slept with the wife of Uriah, a member of the army under David's command. Uriah was a loyal member of David's camp who was away fighting (2 Sam. 11:2–4). Ultimately, rather than acknowledging his actions and showing accountability for the pregnancy of Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, David tried unsuccessfully to cover up his affair. When his efforts were unsuccessful, he ordered Uriah's death (2 Sam. 11:14–25). He married Bathsheba in another attempt to cover his poor decisions (2 Sam. 11:27). The consequences of David's leadership decisions follow him throughout his reign.

Chapters 11 and 12 primarily center on David's sinful relationship with Bathsheba. These chapters detail his actions to hide his sin, Bathsheba's pregnancy, the murder of Uriah, and finally, David's condemnation, confession, and consequences. By Chapter 12, the prophet Nathan advises David and uses a parable to convict David for his sin with Bathsheba. In doing so, Nathan takes the necessary steps to hold David accountable for his actions. Nathan's influence and guidance led David to repentance.

In Chapter 13, the consequences of David's previous decision-making unfold in different areas, including his family. For example, David's daughter Tamar is raped by her half-brother, Amnon. David did not hold Amnon accountable when he learned about his son's actions. This is contrary to the way Nathan held David accountable. According to 2 Samuel 13:21, "When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry."¹ Despite his anger, David never disciplined his son for his actions. In response to David's unwillingness to hold Amnon accountable, David's other son, Absalom, killed Amnon. In addition, this lack of accountability led to Absalom challenging David's position and authority.

According to Schücking-Jungblut, "2 Sam 15:2-6 summarily depicts how Absalom criticized the king's supposed neglect of justice. He intercepts those on their way to the king for judgment, discredits David's function as a judge, and proclaims himself as an alternative."² As king, an inability to mete out proper justice would potentially destroy the people's confidence and lead them to seek a ruler to ensure true justice within the kingdom. Schücking-Jungblut continues, "Absalom's accusations against David fall on sympathetic ears—he 'stole the hearts of the men of Israel' (15:6)."³ Sanders highlights the contrast in the maneuverings of David and Absalom. He points out that although David's exploits and affairs were committed and handled secretly, Absalom publicly displayed his political dealings.⁴

In chapters 14 and 15, Absalom rebels against David. He was later allowed to return to Jerusalem but was not fully restored by his father (2 Sam. 14:24). As a result, "Absalom lived two years in Jerusalem without contact with David" (2 Sam. 14:28). These incidents reflect the intensity of the rift between David and Absalom. Chapters 16 and 17 emphasize this dissension within the kingdom as the people divide between David and Absalom. The fighting is so fierce that twenty thousand are killed in the final battle between the two camps (2 Sam. 18:7). During this final battle, Absalom, David's son, became tangled by his hair on a low tree branch while riding his mule (2 Sam. 18:9). King David's commanders noticed Absalom's vulnerability. Despite the orders from the king not to harm his son, the commanders struck and killed Absalom (2 Sam. 18:14–15).

The story of King David provides several relevant illustrations of the many facets of leadership. His journey highlights his leadership complexities as a military commander and illustrates how his leadership qualities and actions are intertwined with his parental role. The parent/child dynamic of David and his children is highlighted throughout this paper to present a fascinating view of leadership accountability's power. After repentance from his sin with Bathsheba, the Lord rewards David's self-accountability. Berger writes, "David has succeeded in saving his royal line by

¹ 2 Sam. 13:21

² Friederike Schücking-Jungblut, "Political Reasons for the Success and Failure of Absalom's Rebellion (2 Sam 15-19)," *Vetus Testamentum* 68, no. 3 (2018), 466.

³ Ibid, 466–7.

⁴ Seth Sanders, "Absalom's Audience (2 Samuel 15–19)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 3 (2019), 521.

transforming his character—a change highlighted most poignantly by the noble reaction he displays to the illness and death of Bathsheba's infant son."⁵ However, David's parental leadership presents shortcomings in accountability and discipline that ultimately devastate his family. Though flawed, parents are responsible for growing from their sins and disciplining their children to develop them into righteousness (Heb. 12:11). Bunge believes parents are the most important influence in a child's development.⁶ As such, David's actions show that a lack of accountability has potential long-term implications.

Leadership Discussion

David was known as a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). He remains a prominent and often-referenced figure throughout the Old Testament. Beyond his outstanding achievements and strengths, David exhibited several leadership imperfections that are common today. These flaws included a need for more leadership visibility, ethical decision-making, and accountability. This section details David's decisions, providing the backdrop to his ineffectiveness and the adverse consequences of his leadership behaviors. This section explores the layers of David's reign while emphasizing lessons learned from his tenure as king.

Leadership Visibility

Chapter 11 notes that King David did not go with his army into battle. Instead, he remained in Jerusalem as his team engaged in conflict. Considering his influence as their leader and his past military experience and triumphs (1 Sam. 18:7), there was great potential for David's visibility to impact his army and his decision-making positively. Additionally, David's absence from battle made him more susceptible to temptation. Matthew Henry writes, "Had he been now at his post at the head of his forces, he would have been out of the way of this temptation. When we are out of the way of our duty, we are in the way of temptation."⁷ Leadership visibility is a pivotal tactic in connecting the leader and their teams. It centers around leaders being present and actively engaging with their teams within the context of their leadership positions. Studies suggest that visibility also establishes trust and confidence in the leader. Schleckser notes that "people respond when they know their leader is watching and paying attention because they feel important enough for that attention."⁸

⁵ Yitzhak Berger, "On Patterning in The Book of Samuel: 'News of Death' and the Kingship of David," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 4 (2011), 475.

⁶ Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 4 (2008), 350.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 453.

⁸ Jim Schleckser, "The Importance of Leader Visibility in Times of Crisis: Putting in Face Time with Your Team Creates Transparency, Trust, and Peace of Mind.," [www.inc.com](https://www.inc.com/jim-schleckser/the-importance-of-leader-visibility-in-times-of-crisis.html), July 21, 2020, <https://www.inc.com/jim-schleckser/the-importance-of-leader-visibility-in-times-of-crisis.html>.

When leaders are absent, doors are open for rampant misconceptions, misinformation, and employee perceptions. It also creates a silo and isolation that disconnects leadership from the organizational culture and teams from their leaders. Visible leadership helps establish a vision and goals and creates a positive environment.⁹ Had David demonstrated effective leadership by being more visible to his team, he would have joined his army in battle, displaying a powerful example of commitment to the mission and those fighting. His presence could foster unity and a sense of shared trust. However, his negligence left him susceptible to the temptations that led him away from his commitment and responsibilities. He would eventually give in to his temptations, which ultimately created a domino effect of consequences detrimental to his leadership effectiveness.

Ethical Decision-Making

David's actions consistently demonstrate choices that challenge ethical norms and standards throughout the text. His involvement with Bathsheba, deliberate attempts to hide her pregnancy, and calculated plan to kill Uriah to protect himself violate the conventional ethical conduct that leaders should uphold. Ethical leadership remains a fundamental element of effective leadership that signifies a leader's respect for their position.¹⁰ Ethical leadership encompasses the upholding of honor and the assumption of responsibility. Leaders who adhere to ethical principles foster trust among their teams.¹¹ Ethical leaders should be steadfast in their commitment, interactions, and decision-making while exemplifying unwavering support and empathetic engagement with their team.

Ethical leadership contributes to a positive team environment. The impact of ethical leadership is far-reaching and has an extensive effect on team culture and organizational outcomes. When team members consider their leaders ethical, they experience greater leadership satisfaction and perceive their leaders to be effective, honest, and principled decision-makers.¹² These attributes can foster a higher level of commitment and trust. Due to trustworthy relationships with their leaders, team members are willing to act above and beyond their typical duties. Most notably, ethical leaders exercise caution in the use of their leadership authority. They work to ensure that they neither exploit nor mistreat individuals within their teams¹³ nor misuse their power when presented with external opportunities.

⁹ Mahua Nandy, "Importance of Total Quality Management (TQM) and Lean Six Sigma for Business Organizations," *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science* 4, no. 8 (August 2022), 703.

¹⁰ George C. Banks et al., "Ethical Leadership: Mapping the Terrain for Concept Cleanup and a Future Research Agenda," *The Leadership Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2021), 361.

¹¹ Kayode K. Eluwole, Osman M. Karatepe, and Turgay Avci, "Ethical Leadership, Trust in Organization and Their Impacts on Critical Hotel Employee Outcomes," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 102 (2022): 103153, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103153>.

¹² Michael E. Brown and Linda K. Treviño, "Ethical Leadership: A Review and Future Directions," *The Leadership Quarterly* 17, no. 6 (2006), 596–7.

¹³ Ibid.

David's behavior falls short of exemplary and ethical leadership. His deliberate exploitation of Uriah, a dedicated team member, and his intentional manipulation of power to kill Uriah were strategic displays of abuse of power. David leveraged his leadership power to serve his interests. David's actions demonstrate an apparent deviation from ethical leadership. His mistreatment of Uriah and the misuse of his ability to harm him reveal a troubling abuse of authority.

Leadership Accountability

David's leadership needed a critical component: accountability. The pivotal role of leadership accountability is central to effective leadership. Accountable leaders take ownership of their choices. They recognize that ownership of their decisions to themselves, teams, and stakeholders is critical regardless of whether the implications are positive or negative. Corporate scandals and adverse effects on organizations are typically linked to a failure of accountability,¹⁴ while leaders who uphold accountability standards find more positive results in their actions.

Communication transparency among leaders is an essential aspect of an effective organization.¹⁵ Transparency eliminates the spread of misinformation and helps to build trust and confidence. When leaders are open about their decisions, rationale, and failures, it allows for open and honest communication and feedback from their teams and creates a more collaborative and understanding culture. Admitting failures and allowing the team to see leadership mistakes demonstrate humility and allow others to become more open about their strengths and weaknesses. Leaders should exemplify behaviors their teams can model to create a flourishing environment.

David needed to surround himself with the wise counsel that he needed to help him make the most appropriate decisions, and he should have confided in people on his team who would hold him accountable for the choices that he would make. The absence of accountability is evident in his impregnating Bathsheba, orchestrating Uriah's death, and marrying Bathsheba to cover his indiscretions. David frequently evaded responsibility and often relied on confidants who enabled his actions. When finally confronted by Nathan, David was repentant. However, he struggled to extend the same accountability to his son Amnon when he raped Tamar.

This lack of accountability set off a chain reaction, culminating in the downfall of his son, Absalom. David's actions and adverse leadership decisions influenced the flood of negative events until the eventual death of David's other son, Absalom.

Conclusion

Leadership is a crucial driver of success in any organization. It is about taking action. Gottfredson and Reina note, "Leaders are responsible for making decisions,

¹⁴ Pedro Novo Melo, Adelaide Martins, and Manuel Pereira, "The Relationship between Leadership and Accountability: A Review and Synthesis of the Research," *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education* 23, no. 6 (2020), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 352.

taking action, and creating cultures that help their organizations adapt and succeed."¹⁶ In essence, David's story emphasizes that leadership is not merely about the title or authority; it's about showing up, leading by example, and demonstrating commitment even when faced with challenges.¹⁷ The relevance of visible leadership remains a critical principle for guiding leaders in any era.

David's repercussions and poor choices can be traced back to his lack of accountability, evident at pivotal moments throughout Scripture, such as battle, adultery, and authority. In the context of battle, he lacked accountability to his troops, resulting in poor decisions and unfavorable outcomes. His presence at the battle would have prevented the opportunity to be tempted by Bathsheba. His lack of accountability was also evident when he engaged in an affair with Bathsheba and took the extreme step of orchestrating her husband's death instead of facing the consequences of his actions. Finally, he failed to hold himself accountable to the overall responsibilities in his leadership position, perpetuating a cycle of neglect, undermining his role, and failing to discipline Amnon for rape. The absence of accountability in various dimensions of his leadership contributed significantly to the unfolding adverse effects.

Leaders of today can take away essential insights from David's example. By actively avoiding behaviors that model his actions or behaviors that have the potential to yield similar consequences, leaders can uphold the great responsibility of their role while leading and motivating their teams through example so that together, they can achieve a common goal. By formulating guiding principles and setting accountability measures, leaders can establish well-defined boundaries and ethical standards that help safeguard against actions compromising their integrity, reputation, organization, and stakeholders. This approach paves the way for visible, honest, and responsible leadership motivated by respect and principled decision-making.

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¹⁶ Ryan K. Gottfredson and Christopher S. Reina, "Exploring Why Leaders Do What They Do: An Integrative Review of the Situation-Trait Approach and Situation-Encoding Schemas," *The Leadership Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2020): 101373.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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