Power Play and Decision Making: King David and Absalom

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Abstract

Steussy (1994) declared the story of King David and Absalom as "a tale about the exercise of power" (p. 218). In the power play between King David and Absalom, the latter exploited the former's weak position to sway the Israelites' political will favorably. Scholars proffered different reasons but could not decipher the reason for the overwhelming national resentment against David during this period (Weingreen, 1969, p. 263). However, one reason Absalom became the tipping point for the rebellion was Absalom's resentment of Tamar and Amnon incident (2 Sam. 13:19-22) due to the inaction of King David to discipline Amnon and reconcile with Absalom, giving room to Satan to use Absalom (McIndoe, 2003). This paper studied the impact of decision making (action and inaction) on the acquisition or cessation of power. It shows that weakened character weakens resolve to take decisive steps, and the inaction could be fatal for the organization (nation), emphasizing that others suffer when leaders do not resist the seduction of power (Fast et al., 2012).

Keywords: power play, decision making, King David, Absalom, adverse effects of inaction

Ivancevich et al. (2008) explained power as a party's ability to affect another's actions, while influence is a relationship in which a party persuades another to do its bidding. Ivancevich et al. summarized this explanation as power being potential influence and influence being power in action. There are different displays of power in Absalom's rebellion against his father, King David.

French and Raven (1959) named five types of power—legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent. King David had legitimate power, but Absalom used reward power to steal the hearts of the Israelites from the King (2 Sam. 15:1–6). Both used expert power to sway the outcome of the rebellion to their side.

Absalom used the expert power of Ahithophel, a man renowned as an oracle in wisdom, to establish his rule (2 Sam. 16:23). In comparison, David used the expert

power of the wisdom of Hushai the Archite (2 Sam. 15:31–37). The referent power of King David over Hushai made the latter concur with the former's demand to pretend to be with Absalom to sabotage the rebellion (2 Sam. 16:15–19). Also, King David used his expert power as a strategic leader to plant Hushai in Absalom's camp ahead, knowing Absalom would soon need counsel so Hushai could neutralize Ahithophel's counsel, which was a successful strategy.

Considering the rebellion's novelty, King David and Absalom had to make nonprogrammed decisions. According to Simon (1960), programmed and nonprogrammed decisions emanate from routine and nonroutine incidents. Cafferky (2011) posited an intuitive decision-making process in a nonroutine scenario like the outbreak of the rebellion.

Fast et al. (2012) posited that overconfidence makes leaders act rashly. Fast et al. posited further that when an overconfident leader gets power, it could be disastrous for the leader and the organization the person leads. Absalom was overconfident, seeing he could muster almost all Israel to back him. It agrees with Fast et al.'s position that overconfident people seek power, which makes them more brash and overconfident when they get control. It manifests in Absalom's easy trust in Hushai to the detriment of sounder advice by Ahithophel, which led to his Waterloo and the slaughter of thousands of Israelites (2 Sam. 18:7), as Fast et al. predicted.

According to Luke 14: 31–32, the army with a superior strategy wins the war. Dysfunctional conflict makes groups have distorted perceptions. Dysfunctional conflict is "a confrontation or interaction between groups that harms the organization or hinders the achievement of organizational goals" (Ivancevich et al., 2008, p. 305). Bacal (2004) described this type of conflict as ugly, though it could be good; that is, conflict could be positive and developmental. They believe they are superior to the other side. Absalom was overconfident, though God answered King David's prayer on Ahithophel's counsel; Absalom's team had a distorted view of their strength. Hushai led Absalom to death by advising him to lead the army, whereas David did not go to battle, using intuition based on his experience. It was a better strategy, according to Proverbs 24:6—a person with better strategy wins.

The three behavioral factors—values, propensity for risk, and escalation of commitment—that affect the decision-making process shared by Ivancevich et al. (2008) revealed the lack of values of Absalom, his high propensity to risk, and his tendency to escalate commitment. King David's avoidance method in the conflict with Amnon and Absalom was at the root of the rebellion (Guzik, 2022; Meyer, 1914; Trapp, 1868). Ivancevich et al. advised against using avoidance as a final conflict resolution method. McIndoe (2003) confirmed that King David's inaction on the incest was the beginning of Absalom's hostility. Thus, the paper studies the impact of decision making (action and

inaction) on the acquisition or cessation of power. It shows that weakened character weakens resolve to take decisive actions, and the inaction could be fatal for the organization (nation), emphasizing that others suffer when leaders do not resist the seduction of power (Fast et al., 2012).

Decision Making

Ivancevich et al. (2008) defined decisions as means of solving problems or achieving results. Ivancevich et al. continued that decision making is choosing a solution to a problem or an action on an opportunity. Murnighan and Mowen (2002) asserted that a manager's effectiveness shows by the quality of their decisions, which could be detrimental or beneficial to the manager's career and the organization's success (Ivancevich et al., 2008).

Programmed Versus Nonprogrammed

Simon (1960) proposed two types of decisions. According to Simon, there are programmed decisions when an issue is routine and repetitive, and a process can handle it. For example, in Bible days, 2 Samuel 11:1 states that there was a regular season when kings went to the battlefield with their armies. Warfare was a routine and repetitive event at the time. Another example is, earlier, in Numbers 1, God gave the Israelites the process of their war formation according to their tribes when going to war.

However, nonprogrammed decisions are needed when the issue under consideration is non-routine, novel, unstructured, complex, or very important. The perfect problem for a nonprogrammed decision is the Absalom-led rebellion against King David, his father. There were two occasions when he was not fully King over Israel: (a) after the death of Saul (2 Sam. 2) and (b) when Sheba made a secession attempt, calling Israelites to stop following David, and they obeyed, leaving only Judah (2 Sam. 20). None of these was as unique and comparable to this rebellion in magnitude (Weingreen, 1969, pp. 263–264). This problem, unlike the other rebellions, was complex due to the father–son relationship of the characters. Lastly, it was essential as the magnitude could lead to a complete overthrow of King David, unlike others who attempted to secede parts of the kingdom.

Intuitive Versus Rational Decision Making

Cafferky (2011) said that when there is an unusual situation with uncertainty, limited time to act, minimal information, no assurance of the outcome of a decision, and leaders can take many alternative actions, leaders use their intuition instead of a rational decision-making process to decide. Intuitive decision making relies on a leader's *gut* feeling based on experience to process information and the environment to tackle a problem or harness opportunities (Ivancevich et al., 2008; Miller & Ireland, 2005).

Ivancevich et al. (2008) listed a seven-part decision-making process for rational decision making that applies to making nonprogrammed decisions: (a) establish goals and measure results, (b) identify and analyze the problem, (c) develop alternative solutions, (d) evaluate alternatives, (e) select the best solution, (f) implement the decision, and (g) follow up and evaluate the decision. However, this method does not apply to the scenario in this paper.

Cafferky (2011) described the scenario Simon (1960) said would need nonprogrammed decisions. The rebellion was an uncertain situation where both parties had limited time to take decisive steps to win. The two parties also had no complete information about each other's camp and the outcome of any decision, though both had alternative actions.

Behavioral Factors

Ivancevich et al. (2008) listed the three factors that impact decision making—values, propensity for risk, and escalation of commitment. According to Ivancevich et al., values are beliefs that guide a person when choosing. Ivancevich et al. explained the propensity for risk as the decision maker's willingness to take risks while making decisions. Lastly, Ivancevich et al. described the escalation of commitment as the tendency of a decision maker to adhere to a previous decision more when a rational decision maker would withdraw.

Guzik (2022) opined that King David was indulgent of the princes, so he did not hold Amnon accountable for the incest. Guzik posited further that the indulgence, in this case, may be due to the King's known sexual escapades that made him unable to correct Amnon. It was extended to Absalom, too, on the murder of Amnon. He was not corrected, and, eventually, he strayed, rebelling against his father, leading to his demise. David respected and honored his parents despite the father not reckoning with him initially (1 Sam. 16:1–13, 22:3–4). King David also refused to kill King Saul despite opportunities to do so (1 Sam. 24:1-22, 26:1–25). King David had not passed these virtues to his sons, unfortunately.

From the biblical account of Absalom, his propensity for risk can be categorized as very high, from his calculated murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:23–39) to stealing the hearts of Israelites (2 Sam. 15:1–6) to the rebellion (2 Sam. 15:7–17), with sleeping with his father's wives openly (2 Sam. 16:20–22). His escalation of commitment to the wrongs buttresses Fast et al.'s (2012) position of how power could accelerate the ruin of an overconfident person like Absalom and his followers. From the murder of Amnon, he kept making more decisions to discredit and eventually took leadership from his father.

Guzik (2022) showed that Tamar did not go to King David, knowing the indulgence of the princes by the King. It was confirmed by King David's inaction when he heard

about the incident. Moreover, as instructed, King David was partly responsible for Tamar's presence at Amnon's place. Even when Absalom returned from exile, King David did not discipline him for the murder (2 Sam. 14), eventually leading to his demise (Guzik, 2022).

Power Plays Within the Groups

Power

Scholars have defined legitimate power as the ability to influence others based on position in the organization (French & Raven, 1959; Ivancevich et al., 2008). Reward power is the influence of others based on the hope of reward (French & Raven, 1959; Ivancevich et al., 2008). Coercive power is influence over a party based on the fear that the party wielding influence will punish the other party if it does not yield to the influence (French & Raven, 1959; Ivancevich et al., 2008). Expert power is influence over others due to expertise, special skills, or knowledge. Referent power influences a subordinate by the latter's identification with the leader's personality or behavioral traits (French & Raven, 1959; Ivancevich et al., 2008).

It was not the first time someone would hijack power from King David. Joab had often seized power from David; he knew how to take opportunities quickly. This ability made him head of the army (1 Chron. 11:6) and took advantage of Amasa (2 Sam. 20:1–10). In the incident in this study, though David had the legitimate power and said, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2023, 2 Sam. 18:5), Joab used coercive power to kill Absalom and threatened David to renege on his cry for Absalom over the victory of his soldier (2 Sam. 18; 19:1–8).

Ivancevich et al. (2008) stated methods of group conflict resolution. They are avoiding, accommodating, collaborating (problem solving), compromising, and dominating. Thus, King David could have responded to Amnon's misconduct in other ways.

Ivancevich et al. (2008) explained that avoidance in conflict is a method of steering clear of the party in dispute, which King David used. Ivancevich et al. said accommodating allows the other party to win. King David wanted to use this method with his choice of Amasa as the army head, as making Amasa the head of the Israeli army was more important to the rest of Israel than King David and Judah. Furthermore, Ivancevich et al. said collaboration is a method of the parties working together to resolve the conflict. Compromising is finding an acceptable solution for the parties to the conflict for everyone to feel good. Lastly, dominating is a method that a party may employ to win, irrespective of others involved. An example is how Joab eliminated Absalom and Amasa.

Though Joab disregarded King David's instruction on Absalom, Joab's action benefitted Israel overall. King David had been indecisive in handling the feud within his household since the incest occurred. Is it likely that Absalom would have desisted from going after King David's life if spared? Would King David have openly raised the contentious issue with Absalom, his household, and Israel, accepting his fault and condemning Amnon for his deed, comforting Tamar, Absalom's sister? Taking the dominant approach at the war front to eliminate Absalom, once and for all, was needed to end the spiraling and degenerating situation. This action aligned with Ivancevich et al.'s (2008) explanation of a dominating conflict resolution method.

King David's decision to make Amasa head of the army is of more importance to the rest of Israel than Judah. According to Ivancevich et al. (2008), this approach is the accommodating response that, unfortunately, Joab thwarted (2 Sam. 20: 9–10). Scripture noted that all Israel saw it was not King David's plan to kill Amasa, and they came to make David king again. Without it, God's plan for David would have been frustrated to rule all of Israel again.

Background to the Rebellion

Going through the account of Israel's journey to the promised land, Steussy (1994) declared that though both judges and kings are to advance God's agenda, almost certainly, political and military power are eventually misused to oppress the people. It accounts for the earlier grievances against King David. It also showed why those with power must use it responsibly or others suffer (Steussy, 1994). Steussy further posited that God promised King David that his lineage would forever be on the throne to show His desire to secure and ensure a just government for people while on earth, not only to favor David.

Weingreen (1969) explored many reasons for the mass rebellion against David by other scholars. Weingarten stated bloodshed—ruthless military campaigns at the expense of the Israelites' lives, ruthless elimination of Saul's family, and elimination of Uriah to cover up Bathsheba's pregnancy. Others stated King David's aloofness, old age, and increase in grievances due to delayed justice. The latest reason for old age was why a Philistine almost killed King David, but Abishai rescued him (2 Sam. 21:17). How come Absalom did not save the situation but exploited it? It was bitterness and anger, according to McIndoe (2003).

King David and Absalom allowed the Tamar and Amnon incident (2 Sam. 13:19–22) to linger unresolved, and, as Ephesians 4:26–27 predicted, Satan entered, and Absalom eventually became the ready rebellion leader against his father. McIndoe (2003) implied that both disobeyed the Scriptures (Eph. 4:26–27) and allowed the sun to go down on their wrath. Had King David taken action, using the dominating group conflict

resolution approach to enforce Exodus 22:16–17 and Deuteronomy 22:28–29, commanding Amnon to marry Tamar, as Meyer (1914) and Trapp (1868) recommended, Absalom might not have avenged Tamar's rape. Thus, King David could have responded in other ways with attendant better outcomes than avoidance or ignoring the issue.

Steussy (1994) suggested that King David's sons' murdering of each other was to jostle for power (p. 210). Other scholars (Bright, 1960; Noth, 1958; Pfeiffer & Bentzen, 1948) wondered how Absalom could get a landslide national rebellion against the king involving both the North and the South with notable national figures like Ahithophel in support (Weingreen, 1969, pp. 263–264).

Group Dynamics

Group interactions show that people join groups for many reasons—need, social, esteem, and economic (Ivancevich et al., 2008). Why would Ahithophel, Abishai, and Amasa decide to follow Absalom? Why did Joab not follow him? Esteem reasons seem the perfect answer. Ahithophel would undoubtedly emerge as the new king's adviser; Abiathar, the high priest; and Amasa, the head of the army. Also, Ivancevich et al. gave another reason for a group formation—proximity—being at the exact location to advance common goals. Absalom made himself available to the people, unlike King David. Also, he treated them with esteem (2 Sam. 15:1–6). It is not surprising, then, that the whole of Israel followed Absalom. Thus, according to the Scriptures, Absalom stole the heart of all Israel from King David (2 Sam. 15:6), and Absalom hijacked power from King David.

Conclusion

The avoidance method in conflict resolution in decision making allows conflict issues to be left unattended (Ivancevich et al., 2008). Ivancevich et al. (2008) stated that this method does not help to settle issues before they escalate. David left problems unattended. The sole anger and resentment over Amnon's defilement of Tamar led to Absalom's successful ploy to kill Amnon.

The same isolated issue led to resentment for King David; the latter punished Absalom by not seeing him but did not punish Amnon. McIndoe (2003) emphasized the Scripture that said if you allowed the sun to go down on your wrath, Satan would enter (Eph. 4:26–27). McIndoe said David wept because he knew he should have acted earlier, saving everyone from the unfolded calamity.

This ancient event points to the need for national or organizational leadership to take decisive steps to address uncomfortable negative issues as they happen to avoid degenerating into a full-blown organizational disaster. The lessons from the David and

Absalom case show that choosing to act promptly would avert the rise of negative energy that could have been channeled positively to creativity and innovation to respond swiftly to environmental changes. One can imagine how King David could use Absalom's skills in people engagement to endear himself back to the Israelites when his popularity was waning.

Black et al. (2020) captured an example of what fantastic teamwork could achieve. Black et al. gave an instance where a company successfully responded to changes in its global market. Ford saw the need to improve one of its best-selling products to align with contemporary trends, which could result in a lower market share if unaddressed. Ford successfully turned around the F-150, leading to a $1.1 billion increase in revenue. According to Black et al., group cohesion, as demonstrated by the Ford team, could prevent the ending of a group, whether department or organization, from threatening global dynamics. Ivancevich et al. (2008) referred to the cohesiveness of a group as a force that pulls members to want to be in the group rather than out of the group. Nothing made them want to be on the same team in the David and Absalom case. Organizational leaders should avoid this type of scenario.

Further research using contemporary case studies in organizations would help to see more adverse consequences of avoiding as a permanent group conflict resolution method. Other research may assess when avoidance may be the reasonable option in group conflict resolution. An example from the Scripture is when people wanted to forcibly make Jesus king after he fed the 5,000 (John 6:1–15).

About the Author

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