

# **Management by Proverbs**

**Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results**

**Michael Zigarelli**



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*Management by Proverbs*  
*Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results*  
by Michael Zigarelli

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## Principle 8

# Design a Decision Tree



**T**he quote is attributed to Woodrow Wilson: “One cool judgment is worth a thousand hasty councils.” A century later, it may be worth a few billion dollars as well. Just ask the folks who led a WorldCom.

On August 30, 2000, top management at WorldCom learned that their rival, Global Crossing, might be planning to buy Digex, Inc., a web-hosting company WorldCom wanted for itself. So on August 31, a team of WorldCom analysts went to the offices of Digex’s parent, Intermedia Communications, a young and unprofitable company, to inspect their books in preparation for making an acquisition offer. After a mere *90 minutes* examining the financials, the team left to draft their proposal to buy Intermedia, and in doing so, to buy Digex. They planned to offer six billion dollars.

The next day, in a conference call, WorldCom’s board of directors spent a mere 35 minutes approving that offer. Astonishingly, no board member had any documentation or analysis in support of the transaction, according to a U.S. Attorney General’s report issued later. The board just rubber stamped the deal to beat Global Crossing’s bid, which was allegedly due by 5 P.M. that day.

After acquiring Digex, WorldCom did little to resuscitate its ailing parent, Intermedia, thinking they could eventually sell it off. But WorldCom never found a buyer for most of Intermedia's assets, and three years later, Intermedia's 800,000 square foot corporate campus stood vacant.

In the subsequent bankruptcy investigation of WorldCom—the largest bankruptcy in American history—one director admitted to the Attorney General that in the Intermedia deal, “we paid \$6 billion and got nothing in return.” Another director's first response about the debacle was equally striking: “Pardon me while I throw up.” A third one testified that “God himself could not have made the decision in one day.”<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the days of scientific management<sup>2</sup> we have considered speed to be a virtue at work. And that's an assumption many of us would still make—unless, that is, we paused long enough to really think about the typical consequences of that assumption. There's a significant down side to making a habit of fast decisions, a down side that's described in a growing body of carefully-crafted research.<sup>3</sup> As some authors have said, we can easily fall prey to decision-making “speed traps” that bring our initiatives to a screeching halt.

Let's be clear about this, though: Streamlined decision-making and beating the competition to market are hallmarks of world-class organizations, but hasty decisions are not. The trick is to pursue the former while vigilantly avoiding the latter. This was not the case at WorldCom, an organization whose zealous (and sometimes fraudulent) decisions were driven by expediency. Their lack of due diligence culminated in ruinous results—results predicted not just by today's wise research, but centuries ago by a wise king.

## **Proverbs on Prudent Decision-Making**

Proverbs cautions us about haste, inviting us instead to adopt a deliberate process for making better, more God-honoring decisions. Consider this wisdom trio:

*It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,  
or to be hasty and miss the way  
(Proverbs 19:2)*

*Do you see a man who speaks in haste?  
There is more hope for a fool than for him  
(Proverbs 29:20)*

*The plans of the diligent lead to profit,  
as surely as haste leads to poverty  
(Proverbs 21:5)*

Operating in haste—doing or saying things without sufficient consideration of their consequences—is worse than foolishness (29:20). It often leads to lackluster results (21:5) and it’s a deviation from God’s path (19:2). In fact, the Hebrew word translated as “miss the way” in Proverbs 19:2 carries the connotation of “committing sin” and is translated as such dozens of times in the Old Testament.

Hasty decision-making, then, is something we should avoid at all costs. But although we understand this common sense principle, we still act impetuously on occasion—and *in full confidence that we’re doing the right thing*. This may be the most pernicious thing about decision-making at the speed of business: We have an infinite capacity to believe we’re taking the right course of action. Proverbs 16:25 speaks in a penetrating way to our overconfidence:

*There is a way that seems right to a man,  
but in the end, leads to death  
(Proverbs 16:25)*

Unfortunately, Christian leaders fall into this trap, too. Sometimes we act on the assumption that we're godly people doing godly things—that we hear God clearly on our timetable—and we thereby conclude that our decisions are simply a response to His will. But in our hurry, what we're hearing may not be God at all; rather, it may be our self-talk shaped by years of secular management training, bad habits, and assimilation to our corporate culture (recall Principle 1). We think that we're traveling God's highway when in reality, we've just blown past His "Do Not Enter" sign!

Ironically, such missteps culminate in decision-making that's *independent* of God's counsel. Our overconfidence and overload beget oversight, and the "way that seem[ed] right to" us back when we made the decision, "in the end, leads to death"—to death of opportunities, of our budgets, of our limited time, and sometimes, even of our jobs.

If you've ever been stricken by this "zeal without knowledge" approach to decision-making, here's some good news: There is a way to inoculate yourself from future infections—a time-honored managerial tool called a "decision tree."

### **Design a Decision Tree**

A decision tree is a sequence of questions that helps us preserve our non-negotiable values. It's like a flow chart—a graphically illustrated, step-by-step process that reminds us what to consider when making choices. In doing so, this tool slows us down, brings circumspection into our decision-making process, and ultimately generates good options that we may have missed without the tool.

What are these questions we should ask? Personally, I'd recommend devising your own set that fits your corporate values and aligns with the norms where you work. To stimulate your thinking, though, let me show you the set of Biblically-based questions I used as a School of Business dean, along with their rationale. They're not intended to be normative for every Christian leader, but they were road-tested and refined by a decade's worth of my Christian MBA students before I personally put them into practice.

To evaluate almost any option, you might want to consider at least these four questions:

*Question 1: Is the option legal?*

Don't break the law. That's axiomatic. Granted, it's possible that a higher law may mandate an exception (e.g., Jesus turning over the tables in the temple (Mark 11) or Daniel's refusal to pray to the Babylonian king (Daniel 6)), but those times will be *exceedingly* rare. Almost never in Scripture did God ask someone to break the law. In fact, the New Testament teaches us to submit to earthly authority (Romans 13).

*Question 2: The Servanthood Test: If people are affected, can you envision Jesus treating them this way?*

When making decisions, God-honoring leaders balance "servanthood" (the needs of individual stakeholders) and "organizational stewardship" (the financial needs of the organization). That is, they seek courses of action that reside in the intersection of these tenets of the faith. Questions 2 and 3 of the decision tree provide the left and right guardrails here.

In an organizational context, we can think of *servanthood* as "making a top priority of identifying and meeting the needs of individual stakeholders" (customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, creditors, local community, etc.). It

means to conceptualize all people as children of God, created in His image, and to treat them with love and respect in every decision that we make.

Jesus both teaches and personifies this principle in places like John 13 (Jesus washing the feet of His disciples), Matthew 20 (Jesus teaching that a godly leader is one who serves), and in the ultimate act of servanthood, His sacrifice for us on the cross. That's why in the decision tree, this "Servanthood Test" might be captured well by the question: *if people are affected, can you envision Jesus treating them this way?*

This is a critical threshold question, a non-negotiable prerequisite for us. As imitators of Jesus, we shouldn't take any action that He wouldn't take. So options that don't pass this litmus test should send us back to look for better options that are more consistent with the character of Jesus. Which of these "better options" should we select? That's where Question 3 comes in.

*Question 3: The Stewardship Test: Will the option enhance organizational performance?*

Serving individual needs is a central virtue. At the same time, we need to remember that there's more to our faith than servanthood. On the job, God encourages us to never lose sight of the corporate good when we make decisions. This is what I'd call "The Stewardship Test."

We saw the basic theology behind this stewardship test in Principle 6, but it bears repeating here. Everything belongs to God and we are to manage (i.e., "steward") these God-owned resources in accordance with His will. We find stewardship taught throughout Scripture, namely in the Dominion Mandate (Genesis 1:28), in the Psalms ("The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it" (24:1); "for the world is mine and all that is in it" (50:12)), and in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25). The appli-

cation to decision-making is obvious and inescapable: We Christian leaders are to act as stewards, not owners, of our organizations and of the resources at our disposal. These things belong to God and as such, we are to sustain and grow the organization He's entrusted to us. Under our care, five talents should eventually become ten.

However, we have to apply the same caution here as we did in Question 2 above. Just as it's myopic to reduce Christian leadership to servanthood, it's also myopic to reduce it to good stewardship of the organization. "If we do right by the organization," say some well-intended Christian leaders, "we will have honored God in our work."

In reality, though, that's a little like Boeing saying: "The right wing of the plane is more important than the left, so let's cut costs by eliminating the left wing." Such an aircraft would clearly never reach its goal. In the same way, Christian leaders do not reach their goal of godly decision-making through an unbalanced, steward-dominated approach. In fact, they ultimately crash the plane, rationalizing away the moral responsibility to care for individual stakeholder needs. Whether that stakeholder is an employee in need of more time off, a prospective customer who wants the full story about your product, a small supplier who can be coerced into reducing his price, or a community advocating that your plant not be relocated, an exclusive focus on the right wing of "organizational stewardship" abandons the left wing of serving individual needs as Jesus would.

That doesn't mean, mind you, that servanthood always trumps stewardship. We can't do without the right wing, either. Rather, it means that a definitive challenge for the Christian leader is to retain both ideals when making decisions—to affirm servanthood and stewardship—and to then move forward with those decisions that pass both tests. Often we'll find that there's broad overlap here, if we'll take the time to look for it.

Still, one question remains: What do we do when there seems to be no overlap—when all the Jesus-like servanthood options appear to fail “The Stewardship Test”? That’s when we ask Question 4.

*Question 4: Have you discerned from God how to resolve the tension between servanthood and stewardship?*

Veteran leaders will tell you that they’ve experienced a lot of moral ambiguity during their careers. Often, the choice is not between right and wrong; it’s between right and right. It’s right to improve organizational performance, of course, but sometimes it’s right to take an action that may be nothing more than a cost to the organization. Giving away expensive product, as Merck does with its drugs in developing countries, is one example. Paying suppliers more than market rate so that they can make a better living and contribute more to local economic development, as Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts do with coffee farmers, is another example. Refusing to open on Sundays so that all employees are assured a day of rest, as Chick-fil-A does, is a third. In each case, organizational stewardship submits to serving individual needs.

There are other times, though, that the ideal of servanthood must submit for the sake of the organization. Cutting loose a problematic employee, mass layoffs to remain solvent, and requiring evening or weekend work to meet a critical deadline are but a few examples. The point is that for Christians, there will be times when, even though an option may not survive one of the litmus tests in the decision tree, it still passes a Biblical test for decision-making. *But how would one know?*

Frankly, not through a flow chart. Ultimately, any decision-making model that claims to be consistent with a Biblical worldview must rely on God for answers. Practically speaking, that means we marinate every step of our decision-making in prayer and discernment. How much more

necessary, then, is discernment when godly ideals seem to conflict with one another—when we are in a right-versus-right scenario?

It's especially at these moments that we need to reflect more deeply, to gather more advice, to recognize and reject any faithful misinterpretations of Scripture we may have formerly embraced, and to substitute instead a humble, patient, and radical discernment God's sovereign will, letting Him lead our leadership. *We are to defer rather than to default*, receiving God's direction on a case-by-case basis.

Hence, Question 4: "Have you discerned from God how to resolve the tension between servanthood and stewardship?" If the answer is "yes," then go forward in faith. If "no," then don't move until the answer is "yes."

For sure, this more judicious approach to decision-making is not always swift, but importantly, neither is it hasty. Though it doesn't guarantee that we'll always make God's choice, it does remind us to always seek it.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. Discuss the fruit of hasty decision-making, from your personal experience. If we know that it is unwise to make hasty decisions, why do we sometimes do it anyway?
2. This chapter discussed one decision-making process that claims to be faithful to scripture. What would you change in this decision tree to improve it?
3. Do you find yourself leaning more toward individual servanthood or organizational stewardship when making decisions at work? How can you achieve a better balance?
4. What obstacles inhibit you from making more God-honoring decisions at work, and what can you do to overcome those obstacles?

## Appendix to Principle 8 The Christian Manager's Decision Tree

