

Consider Carefully What You Do

A King's Cautionary Tale Turned Inspirational Story



A brief study on the best way to respond to near-misses and failures within faith organizations.

Stephen F. Staten

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The simple counsel, "Consider carefully what you do," might sound like a generic self-evident opener for a myriad of life situations. After all, being careful is important in major purchases, romantic relationships, and pursuing a career or particular job. But the earliest record of this statement involved a noble but naive king who had nearly lost his life and had endangered his nation through a reckless alliance and deficiency of principle. Nearly 2900 years later, his turnaround story speaks with astonishing relevance to any values-driven organization and serves as an ideal opener for discussing "first decisions" for leaders.

Now, let's get to the fascinating story of a king's "tragedy averted" experience.¹

The overall account of the king has both highs and lows. Jehoshaphat began reigning in 873 BC from a position of strength, because he "sought the God of his father and followed his commands rather than the practices of Israel. The Lord established the kingdom under his control."

At the beginning of his reign, Israel, located in Samaria, was not a friendly nation, and the separation helped keep Judah distant from Baal worship. But Israel's King Ahab began winning over Jehoshaphat when his son Jehoram married into Ahab's family. Shared family interests and seemingly symbiotic national interests made it easy for Ahab, a man of "vilest manner,"² to lure Jehoshaphat into a close relationship. The texts do not report what Jehoshaphat was thinking when he first met Ahab, let alone his wife Jezebel, the infamous murderer of the good prophets. But we know that he did not "consider carefully" what he was getting into, and, as the saying goes, "bad company corrupts good character."

By all appearances, Jehoshaphat adopted a closed-system model of leadership, much like the fallen kings of Israel and Judah that preceded him. Wiser kings sought advice of seers, prophets, elders, and priests who were also concerned with the spiritual interests of the nation. Lesser kings surrounded themselves with those who would echo their own thoughts, or they came under the spell of poor influencers, which is apparently how Jehoshaphat drifted. The king, though initially grounded, had encircled himself with Baal worshippers, which now, sadly, included his son Jehoram.

Meanwhile, it was an open secret that the prophet Micaiah was against Ahab, who was determined to go to war against Aram, part of Syria, in an attempt to reclaim the Levitical city of Ramoth Gilead. An exchange between the prophet and Ahab indicated that Israel's cause was hopeless. In fact, the king of Israel had been set up to fail.

¹ We will follow the events of Jehoshaphat's reign in 2 Chronicles 17 through 20; all Scripture references are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

² 1 Kings 21:26

Ahab persuaded Jehoshaphat to align with him in the futile war with Aram. Judah's king was enticed by the gifts and charm of his new in-laws, "I am as you are, and my people as your people; we will join you in the war." The king of Israel even persuaded Jehoshaphat to enter the battle dressed in royal clothes, while Ahab went to battle in disguise. Little did the king of Judah know that Aram's army was tasked to kill a king, and no one else – "Do not fight with anyone, small or great, except the king of Israel." Ahab's diversion was cunning. His son-in-law was in line for reigning over Judah, and if the plan succeeded, both kingdoms would be led by Baal worshippers. There is no evidence that Jehoshaphat consulted any advisor or prophet about these choices.

The lack of earnest advice seeking and information sharing, as well as hasty autocratic decisions by both rulers, nearly led to one of the worst debacles of ancient biblical history. When the battle began Jehoshaphat was quickly spotted by the chariot commanders, who thought, "This is the king of Israel." When they turned to attack him Jehoshaphat cried out, and God intervened, making sure that his attackers observed that he was not the king they had been sent to kill. The assassins stopped the pursuit but, as providence would have it, Ahab was to die when someone drew his bow at random, launching an arrow that landed between Ahab's breastplate and scale armor.

Jehoshaphat was spared. But he had been behaving like the archetypal vain emperor who was oblivious to his appearance. No details are provided about what the people of his nation actually thought or said about him, but the king's public failings would have been headlines. First, his son married into a family with a reputation for wickedness. Jehoram's mother-in-law was the infamous murderous Jezebel. Second, Jehoshaphat let his guard down and allowed his nation's interests to become enmeshed with those of a wayward nation of Baal worshippers. Third, he literally put himself in the crosshairs of an assassination plot by dressing as the intended target. These three public embarrassments caused him to be seriously exposed – the proverbial naked emperor. A first-time reader of the story will naturally wonder how long Jehoshaphat can get away with such foolishness. Certainly, someone will speak up among the officials, the prophets, the priests, and the people of Judah.

Indeed, someone spoke up, and the ordeal was transformed by a new plot twist.

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the wrath of the Lord is on you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God."

Immediately following the correction, the newly wise Jehoshaphat went on a campaign from town to town throughout Judea. He appointed judges, which was a role that traditionally functioned between problem handler and stand-in-the-gap leader.³ To these leaders in each city he proclaimed, "Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for mere mortals but for the Lord, who is with you whenever you give a verdict.

³ Judges 2:16

Now let the fear of the Lord be on you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.”

As the king gave further instructions, he brought the nation back to its center by recovering the principles established in Israel’s early period under Moses. Jehoshaphat’s counsel was based on two bookend moments, a conversation between Jethro and Moses about establishing a just organizing system for Israel⁴ and a recollection of that transition nearly forty years later.⁵ The nation’s organizing principles, “best practices” of the times, included regulating laws, limits on the use of testimonies and witnesses in disputes, safe harbor for the accused, fair the treatment of foreigners, and more.

Jehoshaphat’s seriousness is illustrated by the fact that he canvassed his nation city by city. The king had become highly motivated to take his “consider carefully” platform on the road. The campaign was a wise choice, because the next recorded episode in Judah’s history describes a marvelous sign of his God’s approval when two invading nations formed a vast army and waged war on them.

The next thirty verses tell a story of danger, spiritual commitments, collective trust in their God, and a battle confusion that led to the enemy armies obliterating one another. The men of Judah went out to overlook the desert where the vast army had assembled. Instead of engaging their enemy, they observed the aftermath of a massacre. Collecting the plunder, they followed their king back to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. The episode ends with the perfect denouement, “And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side.”

Doesn’t every leader want rest on every side? It would be difficult to find a better “consider carefully” before-and-after case study, with the inflection point being a mere strength-and-weakness assessment. Whether you have experienced a near miss or not, you can benefit from a Jehu and an overview of your organization’s decision making, management, organizing principles, and systems.

Just as Jehoshaphat’s lack of principles and discretion was linked to Ahab, his speedy turnaround and instant drive to recover founding national principles was the result of listening to Jehu. One of the roles of a seer was to observe the connection between choices, behaviors, and outcomes of the citizens and their leaders. Based on the events that followed, Jehoshaphat reconsidered his most personal choices and the overall principles, structures, and processes that would guide is nation. He leveraged his deficits in leadership and practices by setting out to tackle insufficiencies and make them personal and organizational strengths. This lessons-learned example corresponds to what some people call *upstream thinking*, “taking wise collective action to ensure better outcomes rather than simply responding to, and being overwhelmed by, crises we could have foreseen.”⁶

⁴ Exodus 18:17–23

⁵ Deuteronomy 1:9–18

⁶ <https://solutions.thischangeeverything.org/module/upstream-thinking>

Jehoshaphat taught us the wisdom of organizing principles and organizing systems. An **organizing principle** is one of the cardinal commitments of an organization, to which all other principles must yield. Each principle provides “north star” guidance in decision making, problem solving, managing resources, conflict resolution, and attending unmet needs. An **organizing system** is the structure, protocols, and commitments for maintaining organizing principles.

The Nation at the Inflection Point

<u>BEFORE JEHU'S REMARKS</u>	<u>AFTER JEHU'S REMARKS</u>
<p>Top-Down Oligarchy Decisions made unilaterally by Jehoshaphat, influenced by son Jehoram and Ahab</p>	<p>Accountable Monarchy Final decisions made by Jehoshaphat, but everyone was ultimately answerable to judicial systems overseen by Amariah, and the king's household was directly answerable to Zebadiah</p>
<p>Law & Dispute Management The systems were underfunctioning at best, degraded at worst</p>	<p>Law & Dispute Management Oversight of Levites, priests, and heads of families, reset according to the Mosaic model (Deut. 1:9-18)</p>
<p>Organizing Principles For good or bad, whatever served the wishes and perspectives of the king</p>	<p>Organizing Principles (1) fear of the LORD, (2) based on His law, decrees, commands, regulations, (3) the aim of justice, and (4) no injustice, favoritism, or bribery, and (5) handlers must have courage</p>

Interestingly, Jehoshaphat slipped up again with a lack of judgement similar to the one he had exhibited earlier. The king made an alliance with Ahab's son, another evil king, and built a fleet of ships. A prophet scolded Jehoshaphat, “Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made” and the fleet was destroyed.⁷

The king's final recorded episode underpins the idea that even good leaders need to be tethered and reminded of earlier lessons. The overall story also prompts questions about the effectiveness of inner circles that lack the integrity, courage, and capacity to keep their leader grounded to reality and bound by principle.

Most leaders don't have the kind of near miss with disaster to motivate them that the king of Judah experienced. They do, however, have other signs that vulnerabilities exist, and an organizational reset is needed. They also have opportunities to do what Jehoshaphat did – transform their systems. And it begins with listening to thoughtful observers, engaging in thorough reflection, and establishing organizing principles that anticipate current threats and future risks.

⁷ 2 Chronicles 20:35-37, 1 Kings 22:49