

# The Timeless Wisdom of Benjamin Franklin

*By Michael Lee Stallard, Carolyn Dewing-Hommes and Jason Pankau*

The seventeenth of September marks the anniversary of the day in 1789 when the framers of the U.S. Constitution collectively put down their quill pens after sixteen months of work drafting the historic political document. On that final day of the Convention in Philadelphia the esteemed delegates gathered to approve the Constitution and send it to the thirteen states to be ratified. It was at this time that Benjamin Franklin, who had remained quiet through most of the debates, chose to address his colleagues. Although he deemed the work near perfection, he could not agree with all of it. Nevertheless, he was prepared to approve it, telling George Washington and the other framers ...

“for having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects which I once thought right but have found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment and to pay more respect to the judgment of others...Thus I consent, sir, to the Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.”

Ben Franklin’s comments that day displayed his legendary wisdom. History both before and after Franklin’s time has proven just how difficult it is for people to be humble when they hold the reigns of power. The list of leaders who fell from power in no small part due to hubris is long indeed: Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Montezuma, come quickly to mind. More recently, the downfall of a long list of CEOs further attests to the wisdom of humility and folly of hubris.

*The older I grow  
the more apt I am  
to doubt my own  
judgment and to  
pay more respect  
to the judgment of  
others...*

Fortunately, we are also seeing leaders who embrace a leadership process that values humility. One of the signature themes in the story of A.G. Lafley’s turnaround of Procter & Gamble is how he went out to employees seeking to identify the important issues as well as ideas about how to address them.

Lafley, himself a serious student of history and a seasoned marketing professional, knows firsthand the value of listening to people and seriously considering their views.

Another recent leader who has demonstrated humility is Xerox’s Ann Mulcahy. Throughout Xerox’s miraculous turnaround, Mulcahy traveled the world to listen to Xerox employees and customers. They provided the necessary feedback loop to keep her apprised of important issues and the pros and cons of a full range of potential solutions.

It has also been reported that Hewlett-Packard’s new CEO, Mark Hurd, “...visited H-P offices and factories from Boise to Beijing. Hurd likes to ask employees what they would do if they were in his position. At each site, he spoke to employees and sought feedback...in all, he has collected 5,000 emails.”

Critics argue that this approach is inefficient and smacks of “leadership by committee.” These objections are easily addressed with common sense. Obviously, some decisions will not require feedback, either because they must be made on short notice or they address issues that simply don’t need that level of input. That said, the most important decisions and those that require wide-ranging support for effective implementation should only be made following a process that includes broad feedback. It’s important to understand that this is not abdicating decision-making authority by giving people a *vote*; it is, rather, giving them a *voice* and factoring what they say into the decisions ultimately made by the leader.

A decision-making process that values humility and seeks to avoid hubris not only helps leaders make better decisions, it also positively affects the performance of people throughout their organizations. When people have a voice in decision-making it gives them a greater sense of control and ownership. Being a part of decisions energizes them. When they practice this approach, which is more likely to happen if their leaders do, they will make superior decisions too.

As we consider the importance of seeking and considering the views of others before we make our decisions, let us remember the words and example of Benjamin Franklin on that historic day.

---

Michael Lee Stallard is the founder of E Pluribus Partners. Carolyn-Dewing Hommes and Jason Pankau are partners and co-founders of the firm. Together they are contributors to the book *What Managers Say, What Employees Hear* published by Praeger in April 2007.