

# Wise Decisions Aren't Easy: Three Keys to Listening with Discernment

*Val Mullally uses the classic story of Solomon's wisdom and suggests rules for listening*

Imagine a business where you didn't have to make the tough decisions! You probably read that first line with a snort of incredulity. Every entrepreneur, every business owner knows that making tough decisions is part of the territory.

But how does one find the answers to the challenging issues that arise for every business leader?

Let me share a story of one of the world's most successful leaders who had to find the answer in a situation where the wrong choice would have had agonising consequences.

## A Difficult Decision

Turn the clock back three thousand years. There was no law school to train lawyers and attorneys. When serious disputes arose, it was the duty of the leader of the tribe to arbitrate. And on this particular day King Solomon found himself facing a terrible dilemma. The situation must have made a huge impact on those who witnessed it for this, of the many court cases that he held, to be the one that is recorded.

Imagine the scene: two sex workers before the king. Each one claims the baby is hers. Solomon listens to the women bickering. There is no clear evidence: 'there was no one else with us in the house' (1 Kings 3:18): it's a 'she

said this and she said that' scenario. The king calls for a sword. He declares, 'Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.' (1 Kings 3:16-28). What is the truth here? And what action is needed?

Those most vulnerable were entirely dependent on his goodwill. Some artists depict the palace guard holding the baby by its ankle, his sword at the ready in the other. On the king's command the baby would be immediately killed. Imagine the anguish of the true mother of the infant in this story!

As Christian business leaders, what can we learn from this story about handling difficult interventions?

## How to Listen with Discernment

Let me share a helpful tool, from my work as a Transformation Coach, which I gained from the work of Patrick Williams and Diane S. Menendez<sup>1</sup>. This practice can deepen our ability to discern what's needed in times of tough decisions: listen to, listen for and listen with.

👉 #1. What might Solomon have listened *to*? Take a moment to reflect before reading further:  
He listened to their words.  
He listened to their explanations.  
He listened to the energy of their voices.

He listened to their grief.  
He listened to their body language.  
He might, between their fiery exchanges, have listened to their silences (much can be gleaned from times of silence).  
He listened to his inner wisdom.  
And, I believe, he listened to God's whisper.

👉 #2. What might Solomon have listened *for*? Take a moment to reflect before reading further:  
He listened for the truth.  
He listened for integrity.  
He listened for clarification.  
He listened for a solution.  
He listened for his inner wisdom.  
He listened for God's guidance.

👉 #3. What might Solomon have listened *with*? Take a moment to reflect before reading further:  
He listened with his ears.  
He listened with his heart.  
He listened with an attitude of seeking to understand.  
He listened with an open mind.  
He listened with discernment.  
He listened with compassionate curiosity.  
He listened with courage (knowing he had to make a definitive decision that would have life-long consequences for those concerned).



Peter Paul Rubens

The Judgement of Solomon, c. 1617

MuseumStatens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

In a situation like the one Solomon faced in this passage, it can be easy to be judgmental. The women are described as prostitutes, and a powerful king could easily have ignored their plight. We don't know the women's circumstances but, in a society where women were given little regard and where there was no social welfare system, prostitution might have been a woman's only way to glean a living. Here are two women who have no husband, family or community to support them. They are relying on the king's judgement. And to the onlookers this must have seemed a tough decision to make.

We do not have the responsibility Solomon faced, yet those of us in business today need always to be aware that our decisions can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences. What are we listening to? What are we listening for? What are we listening with?

In the end, Solomon did not execute the child. He administered justice. What about us?

As we make our business decisions are we administering justice? Deepening our listening skills can help us to develop this ability.

## Honing our Listening Skills to Make Wise and Fair Decisions

When we hold a listening space for others, we help them to step back and look at the bigger picture. We can support them into saying 'yes' to 'what is'. Here are wise words from Richard Rohr:

'Saying yes to "What is" ironically sets us up for "What if?" Otherwise, we get trapped in the negative past.' Listening well helps people to untangle confused thought, to identify what is true and what really matters, and to make better decisions. As we make our business decisions are we administering mercy as well as justice?

The ability to listen deeply is one of the key soft skills to business success. In researching my book *Ancient Wisdom*

*for Business Success – how to Lead with Courage, Clarity and Confidence*, I explored the advice of Solomon, as recorded in the book of Proverbs. One of the key things that struck me was his habit of careful observation – a key factor in listening well.

When I am in 'deep listening mode' I am observing not only the person's words, but many other facets – such as their appearance, their demeanour, the changing landscape of their face, their breathing and the pace of their speech. I am convinced that Solomon would have listened with similar careful observation. Most of us are familiar with 'Go to the ant ... consider its ways and be wise.' As I noted down and reflected on each chapter of Proverbs I was amazed at the depth of what he noticed and recorded, from his wry humour about lazy habits<sup>2</sup> to his careful observation of the stages of alcoholism – lessons that can be applied to any addiction, even addiction to work! Careful observation is an essential skill: to listen in a way that will bring resolution.

## Listening Wisely to Restore Others

Here's an excerpt from the chapter 'Listening Wisely' in my book:

'Listening well means we support others' emotional well-being. The key to restoring a person's spirit is for them to experience being deeply listened to – listened to in a way that helps them to remember who they are, what truly matters, and what their purpose is in life. People can journey through tough times if their spirits are strong. In my favourite theatre production *The Lion King*, Simba, whose spirit has been crushed, is reminded, 'Remember who you are.'

Re-remembering is picking up the broken pieces and putting the members (pieces) back together again. When we listen deeply, we help people to 're-member' who they are. They remember they are called to be whole – to live as children of God. When listened to wisely, restoring

the person's crushed spirit is possible. The good news is that wise listening is a skill any person can gain. We can listen in a way that supports the person to revive their drooping spirit and find meaning and purpose again<sup>3</sup>.

When deep listening restores people's awareness of who they are, they are able to realign themselves with their God-given purpose in life. In the recent 2021 Faith in Business Retreat, we reflected upon our personal purpose and our business' purpose. When we listen deeply to our team, we can naturally create the reflective space that supports them to live out their unique purpose in life, and helps them to embrace the purpose of the business. On the rare occasion this reflective space may open an employee's realisation that they are not in the work they are called to be. That's okay. Their leaving will give them the opportunity to pursue their unique calling, and open the space for the right person to join your team, whose personal purpose is aligned with your business' purpose. It's a win-win for all concerned.

## A Challenge to Business Leaders

So I invite you, as a business leader to employ your observation skills and consider:

What are you listening to?

What are you listening for?

What are you listening with?

Reflect and record your thoughts on these three questions, with regard to how you are listening to God, to yourself, to your team, to your clients and to your prospective clients. This matters because as an entrepreneur and a business owner who understands that making tough decisions is part of the territory, the quality of your listening is one of the most important skills to travel through both good times and challenging times. It helps you create a team that count it a blessing to work in your organisation; to attract ideal clients who are raving fans; and to build a godly business that makes a difference in this world. 🎧



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