

## **Leadership Lessons from Egypt**

**By John Stanko**

I love to study leadership models in the Bible and I'm sure you do, too. It's a great way to garner valuable lessons from the case studies of people whom God used for His purposes. With that in mind, I want to present some lessons from a leader seldom studied: Pharaoh, the leader of Egypt.

When I mention Pharaoh, who comes to mind? It's probably the Pharaoh with whom Moses encountered in the book of Exodus. That Pharaoh, however, isn't the one I want to focus on. There was more than one Pharaoh and, in this article, I want to look at the one who was Joseph's contemporary in Genesis 37-50. This Pharaoh was one of the best leaders in the Bible and has something to teach us! Here's why.

### **EGYPT IN JOSEPH'S TIMES**

Egypt in Joseph's times was the most powerful nation in the world. Pharaoh had oversight over a large population and army. When Joseph first arrived, Egypt prospered and there was no end in sight.

Yet, God was doing something that would shape history for centuries to come. He wanted to move His people, Abraham's family, to Egypt from where they would make their exodus back to the Promised Land centuries later. To accomplish that purpose, God sent Joseph ahead of his family to Egypt on a mission.

While Egypt enjoyed their prosperity, Joseph was imprisoned – and then the drama played out that led to Pharaoh's famous doubleheader dreams. If you remember, Pharaoh had two dreams, one where seven gaunt cows devoured seven fat cows, the other where seven lean heads of grain consumed seven healthy heads. Joseph helped Pharaoh

understand that these dreams indicated seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty.

The period leading up to the dream, the dream interpretation and the dream application all give us valuable lessons from Pharaoh's leadership that we would do well to emulate.

## **PHARAOH'S LEADERSHIP LESSONS**

Take the time to read Genesis 40:1-5, 20-23; 41:1-4, 33-57; 47:1-4. What can we learn about Pharaoh from these passages?

1. **Pharaoh wasn't afraid to lead his people.** When Pharaoh had his dreams, there were no problems in Egypt. There was plenty of food and he learned from Joseph and his dream that there would be seven more years of plenty. The famine wasn't even close to starting, but Pharaoh made firm decisions concerning the future. He began to prepare for the famine seven years in advance of its coming. What's your seven-year plan for your organization? Do you even have one?
2. **Pharaoh made quick decisions when he found the right person.** There was no procrastination when Pharaoh decided to act. Too often, leaders hesitate to gather more information. But Pharaoh knew he had found a "star" in Joseph and he acted quickly to secure his services and wisdom. Good people are hard to find. When you find them, hire them! You will still have to manage them or else you will eventually have a mess on your hands. Delegation doesn't mean abdication of responsibility. It means you hold your team accountable for results, but don't micromanage the process.
3. **Pharaoh understood personnel issues and effectively used probation, restoration and release.** In Genesis 40, Pharaoh was angry with his cupbearer and his baker. Rather than "fire" them immediately, however, he took time to reflect on the situation. Too often, leaders can let personality

conflicts or misunderstandings affect the relationships with the management team. Pharaoh could make quick decisions when needed, and I am sure he had a temper. In the case of these two “employees,” however, he waited one year. In some sense, he put them on probation.

After a period of time, he “released” (all right, he executed) the baker and restored the cupbearer. Don’t let your personal preferences regarding personnel issues rob your organization of its best talent. Learn to establish a “cooling off” period before making final decisions. Let the employees or team members know that they are on probation. Then when you’ve made your final decision about the future, don’t linger any longer. Make it known to everyone.

It is significant that, using this process, Pharaoh made the best choice, for the restored cupbearer was the one who introduced Pharaoh to Joseph, the man with the plan.

4. **Pharaoh spent time with his team.** Pharaoh restored the cupbearer at his own birthday party that he held for his officials. The king of Egypt spent social time with his leadership team! It appears that they also talked some business while they met. It seems that Pharaoh never had his officials too far away from him at any point in time, so he could get their feedback and input. How close are you to your “team”? You don’t have to be their friend, but you do need to be their partner and associate.
5. **Pharaoh partnered with his opposite.** Pharaoh didn’t fill his staff with people like him. He brought in some “opposites.” Pharaoh was obviously a visionary; he therefore hired a good operations man in Joseph to carry out the day-to-day plans of the kingdom. Partnering with your opposite can be difficult, for they see reality and life in contrast to your viewpoint. They can, however, see what you can’t (and vice versa), however, thus strengthening the team through diversity and friendly dissent.

Over the years, I have worked at not just tolerating people who aren't like me, but celebrating them! I need people who don't think or look like me to build an effective team (that means women and persons of color). How diverse is your team? If your family member fits this need and has the skills, then employ them. If they don't, spare your organization the pain of a bad hire by not employing them.

6. **Pharaoh recognized talent, gifting and “special ability.”** In Genesis 47, Joseph brought five of his brothers to meet Pharaoh. When Pharaoh asked them what they did, they responded that they were shepherds. Pharaoh then made a revealing statement: “If any of them have special ability, put them over my own flocks” (Genesis 47:6). He didn't give Joseph's brothers a job because they needed one or because they were Joseph's brothers. He only wanted those with “special ability” to serve on his leadership team.

Pharaoh knew that world-class results come from employing world-class leaders and managers. Pharaoh had the good sense to hire Joseph but he also restored the right man in his cupbearer, for he was the one who eventually led Pharaoh to Joseph.

Hopefully someone on your team can recognize talent. It doesn't have to be the lead person. When you find someone with that ability, listen to that person. They will save you much aggravation and the pain of a bad hire. And don't ever hire anyone only because they need a job or are related to you or someone already on staff.

7. **Pharaoh promoted youth.** Joseph was only 30 years old when he entered Pharaoh's court. Don't be prejudiced against youth. If you find someone who is talented, hire that person, regardless of their age. Youth can lack experience, but they do have energy and they don't know enough to prevent them from doing saying what everyone has said is impossible.

8. **Pharaoh hired someone with a shady past and no previous experience.** Up to this point, Joseph only had leadership experience in Potiphar's house and the prison. He also had an accusation of sexual harassment hanging over him from Potiphar. Pharaoh looked past that, however, to the needs that only Joseph could address. Almost anyone with talent will have some negatives; you can't find perfect hires. So stop trying and instead find and work with the best talent you can discover.
9. **Pharaoh gave authority and established boundaries.** Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of everything except "the throne." He put Joseph in charge of operations to store food for the famine and then to distribute food in the famine. Joseph's job description and expectations were clear; there was no ambiguity. While Joseph's hiring was a quick one, his job description was clear and well thought out.
10. **Pharaoh was secure in his leadership and had Joseph with him "in the chariot."** Pharaoh had Joseph ride in the chariot as "second-in-command." I have a picture in my mind that Pharaoh was in the same chariot or at least close by. When people honored Joseph, Pharaoh was secure enough that he wasn't threatened by Joseph's wisdom, power or position. Pharaoh was secure in his own leadership. He was taking a chance by putting this newcomer in charge, but Pharaoh shared his power and prestige with this man recently released from prison.
11. **Pharaoh used his power to empower the right people.** All leaders have power. What distinguishes a good from a great or bad leader is how that power is used. Pharaoh used his power to empower Joseph to do the job that God had gifted him to do. Peter Drucker, father of modern management studies, stated that the job of management is to find out what management is are doing that prevents others from doing their job and then to stop doing it. Pharaoh used his power correctly; he used it to help his team get the job done.

12. **Pharaoh approved the plan and let Joseph carry it out.** Pharaoh listened to Joseph's strategy and then approved it. With his stamp of approval, he then let Joseph do it with a minimum of input or interference. Pharaoh did not micromanage or set up a bureaucracy that slowed things down.
13. **Pharaoh gave Joseph an unlimited travel budget.** The Bible states that Joseph traveled throughout Egypt; he had freedom of movement to get his job done (see Genesis 41:46). If you want to empower your team, let them travel. Give them freedom of movement to go see and learn what they need to get the job done. I am not referring to first class travel to exotic places, but instead trips with purpose to benchmark and observe best practices wherever they may be found. This may be onsite visits or conferences that feature world-class teaching and instruction. If you want the best, let them go and learn from the best.
14. **Pharaoh was concerned for Joseph's personal life.** Pharaoh found a wife for Joseph and then helped him take care of Jacob and his brothers when they came to Egypt. Pharaoh made sure that Joseph shared in the wealth and blessing that was within Pharaoh's power to bestow. Pharaoh made sure that Joseph had a life outside his work position and gave him land and money to go with it.
15. **Pharaoh stayed in touch with reality but let Joseph do his job.** When the famine arrived, the people cried out to Pharaoh – but Pharaoh sent them to Joseph and told them to do whatever Joseph told them to do. Wouldn't all like to have a boss or supervisor like that!

## CONCLUSIONS

Pharaoh was rewarded well for his exceptional leadership skills. His country was saved from oblivion and suffering. He actually increased his power and position during the famine, because Joseph successfully leveraged their supply of food and seed for land and a future return on their investment. Pharaoh secured a place in history as a good

leader, in contrast to his counterpart who wielded heavy-handed, authoritarian control during the time of Moses. Moses' Pharaoh was such a bad leader that he allowed his personal pride and blindness to ruin his country for many centuries to come.

What kind of leader do you want to be? I hope you want to be one like Joseph's Pharaoh. Take some time to reflect on your style as it relates to Pharaoh's and see where you need to improve. Then set about building a more effective team than you have now so that you and your organization can be the fullest, best expression of who it is that God intended for you to be.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New International Version.