CHAPTER 11

When Influence Becomes Influenza

Influence Gone Bad

Whether the knife falls on the melon or
the melon falls on the knife, the melon suffers.

—African proverb

A LIFELONG READER, I HAVE BEEN ADDICTED to newspapers, magazines, and books for twenty-five years. Throughout those two and a half decades, I've seen rags-to-riches and success-to-failure stories hit the front page week after week, each one generating its own brand of speculation, gossip, and media feeding frenzy.

However, no modern account can rival the drama and heartbreak of a story that happened more than three thousand years ago. It's the tale of an early franchise player named Saul. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, into a very wealthy family. Taller and stronger than anyone else, he was physically striking—he turned heads then and would do so today. His personality was winsome and commanding. He was brave beyond comparison. He was a patriot who inspired

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nationalism and hope the way a New York firefighter would at a Sunday church service or Monday company meeting in the Midwest. With the blessing of God and the support of the people, he was anointed as the first king of the nation of Israel.

He had a great beginning. Such promise. But as Saul's story makes painfully clear, a strong start doesn't necessarily translate into dramatic, long-term influence.

Saul finished tragically. His end was not just bad, mind you—it was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, the kind that makes us shake at the core even thousands of years later. He died a coward, full of paranoia, void of faith, committing suicide. Why? How? What happened? The man who at the start stood head and shoulders above the rest, literally and figuratively, fell on his sword to end what had become a wretched and miserable life. If this happened today, he would have been a headliner for every news show, or even a miniseries. (If you want the whole story, see I Samuel 9–31.)

I know of no more tragic cycle of deterioration and failure than the life of Saul. It is a road map of pitfalls to avoid for anyone who wants to finish stronger than he starts. Because that's really what counts: how we finish. It doesn't matter how spectacularly we come off the starting blocks if we crash and burn before the end of the race. Our good friend Steve Farrar wrote a book a few years ago titled *Finishing Strong,* in which he uses Scripture and lively contemporary illustrations to describe what it means to build character for the long road. This topic is especially relevant for Tom and me personally. Over a decade ago, we started meeting for breakfast and dreaming of working together. We were bothered by the stories of influential people we knew who had been successful during one season of their life but fell apart in the next. So we began a partnership, not necessarily to quit our jobs and start a business enterprise—that came later. We wanted to figure out how to finish strong, to end more powerfully than we began. We didn't want to be one-season wonders.

Unfortunately, Saul's season of greatness was only momentary, and after his impressive beginning his life followed the path of a downward-spiraling staircase. He descended lower and lower, each level sending him into a phase of diminished influence until his sudden and disastrous end. We know what happened because it's documented. We

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know his epitaph because he spoke it himself: "Surely I have acted like a fool and have erred greatly" (I Sam 26:21b).

In medicine, influenza is an infectious disease in which a virus attacks the respiratory tract, causing a person pain, weakness, exhaustion, and general misery. It's highly contagious and can reach epidemic status quickly, resulting in widespread suffering and even death. The word *influenza* is related to the word *influence*; both terms come from the Latin verb *influere,* which means *to flow in.* We think, metaphorically speaking, influenza is an appropriate description of the process that occurs when a disorder overtakes someone's influence for good and twists it into something harmful and ugly, infecting others and leading to wide-ranging distress. Influenza is influence gone bad.

When we study the life of Saul, we can see ten clear symptoms of illness that marked his descent from influence to influenza.

Unbridled Self-Interest

The first attribute of a life marked by influenza is self-interest and its siblings, arrogance and uncontrolled egotism. We all have an inner self that needs to be fed if we are to maintain a healthy sense of perspective and self-respect. But we also have an ego that needs to be periodically starved to keep us from seeing ourselves as the hub around which the universe revolves. Not long after being made king, Saul started to develop a serious hub complex. Sidlow Baxter describes this stage of Saul's life well in his book *Mark These Men*: "This big-souled giant is shriveling into a shrimp. This kingly hero is becoming a toad beneath the heel of his own sadistic moods and passions. When he was little in his own eyes he was big; but the bigger he has grown in his own eyes, the less he has become."

We aren't sure exactly when and why Saul slipped off the track and began feeding his ego instead of his character. It could have been fueled by any of a number of things: insecurity, paranoia, lack of trust in God's direction. Regardless of the reason, it happened. Unbridled self-interest was Saul's first step away from positive, effective, long-term influence.

The Scriptures are full of examples of people consumed by their own self-interest. Even in the Gospels, the twelve disciples struggled

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with this problem while they were in their twenty-four/seven internship with Jesus. In Matthew 18 and again in Matthew 20, we read about their arguments over who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom. It was all about self-interest, and Christ had to set them straight: to be great in God's kingdom means to consider your own interests last.

Jim Collins has written two invaluable books on life and business. The first (co-authored with Jerry Porras) was titled *Built to Last* and his most recent is *Good to Great.* Both books look at successful businesses and examine the attributes that set them apart from the rest, even under unfavorable circumstances. One of those attributes is a humble leader. In *Good to Great*, Collins discusses a "Level 5 leader," a person who is an unusual mixture of humility and will, unusually modest and hesitant to talk about himself. Collins writes: "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves."

We can conclude from Collins's insights and dozens of other sources that a potent remedy for the influenza of unbridled self-interest is serving others—focusing on someone else's interests over my own. When I take my eyes off my own needs and desires and act on behalf of other people in my world, that's when my influence potential skyrockets. Of course, sometimes we delude ourselves into thinking we're being selfless when we're really just conniving and scheming for ourselves. I may tell myself I'm giving my time and energy for your good, but I really crave the praise and commendation that follows my so-called sacrifice. When our supposed generosity and servanthood are actually disguises for selfishness, our true motive inevitably escapes.

Self-interest in disguise is like a foul odor in a room that can't be masked. The other day, we discovered something in our refrigerator that was stinking up the entire kitchen, and we launched an all-out attack. We cleaned out the fridge from top to bottom, doused every kitchen surface with bleach, took the trash outside, sprayed disinfectant, and placed deodorizing agents in the room and the fridge. Even so, a whiff of the stench hung in the air for several days. In the same way, self-interest doesn't disappear without a battle—even a war. It festers, unac-

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knowledged and hidden, until it's out of control and our appetite for attention, affirmation, and attaboys controls everything we do.

When it comes to self-interest and its effect on character and influence, perhaps the nineteenth-century minister and activist Charles Parkhurst said it best: "The man who lives by himself and for himself is likely to be corrupted by the company he keeps."

Closed-Minded Stubbornness

One of the earliest lessons we have to learn in life is to be open to other people's instruction and input. If we plant our feet and refuse to accept outside feedback, we short-circuit our influence system. Saul wrote the book on stubbornness as he began to resist input from the prophet Samuel, from other godly advisers and his family, and eventually even from God. At first he made excuses and rationalized his disobedient willfulness, but in the end his obstinacy was flagrant and at times irrationally extreme.

Whether by nature or circumstance, people who are especially susceptible to being stubborn and closed-minded tend to be founders, sole proprietors, or long-term singles. I was with a man the other day who had been very successful in starting his own company. After spending some time with him and his executive team, I began to see that no one ever disagreed with him or presented opinions contrary to his; he surrounded himself with yes men whose sole purpose was to carry out his ideas and orders. The problem with this strategy is that we all have a blind spot and bad days, which means we must have honest and forthright people who will tell us frankly when we've messed up or are about to commit a serious mistake.

Stubbornness is a subject I know very well from experience. My wife and I were married when I was twenty-nine and she was twenty-seven. In terms of habits and opinions, our union was a convergence of the Nile and the Amazon. We had each developed a way of life that suited us and had no interest in someone disrupting that lifestyle. Almost everything became grounds for an argument—do we lie in bed and flip channels for 15 minutes, read for 15 minutes, get a glass of water, and then go to sleep? Or do we do all those things in the living room, then go to bed and go to sleep right away? Do we go to the

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grocery store every other day, or do we carefully make a list and go once a week? Do we go to restaurants spontaneously, or do we make eating out a special occasion that we plan in advance? Eventually we realized that being stubborn only led to frustration—and we influenced each other very little when we dug our heels in.

Being stubborn also prevents us from being teachable, and when we lose the ability to learn, we stop influencing for good. Cultivating a teachable spirit should start early in life, which is why the book of Proverbs tells fathers to teach their children the art of receiving instruction: "Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding" (Proverbs 4:1). "Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge" (Proverbs 19:27).

Though my wife and I have learned (and are still learning) to be flexible and open to each other's input, the roots of obstinate independence run deep and strong in our soil—and the apples have not fallen far from the tree. We have had to target stubbornness as a primary focus in our kids so that they can grow up to be healthy influencers themselves and not be cut down by the kind of blind inflexibility that crippled Saul.

Rash Impulsiveness

People who act rashly develop a reputation for not thinking matters through and for changing their mind quickly. This lack of consistency makes it difficult for others to place trust and confidence in them, which hurts their position of influence. The other extreme is someone who can't engage, who thinks and thinks but never acts—the Hamlet syndrome. That behavior certainly has its disadvantages where influence is concerned. But Saul had the opposite problem: rash impulsiveness.

Saul acted hastily and recklessly on a number of occasions, overruling God's timing and authority. Samuel told him to wait to offer a sacrifice after defeating the Ammonites, but he became impatient and took the task into his own hands. In a later incident, Saul rashly imposed a death penalty on any man who ate before Saul avenged himself on his enemies (I Sam 14:18–27). That hasty edict weakened his army and would have sentenced his own son to death if the people had not stepped in on Jonathan's behalf.

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An impulsive and reckless nature usually leads to lots of regret, second-guessing, and involvement in matters that look good at first but eventually tarnish. Saul's impulsive and erratic behavior ended up costing him and his heirs the kingdom; that's quite a loss of influence.

Isolation *and* Secrecy

Another symptom of Saul's influenza was his refusal to take advantage of the sound, healthy friends and counselors with whom he was surrounded. God assigned Samuel to come alongside Saul for accountability and encouragement. But Saul became too busy, too important, too self-oriented, too distant, too dishonest, and too insensitive to benefit from Samuel's friendship, and eventually the relationship was broken. Later in life, David's music and company soothed Saul's troubled spirit, but murderous suspicion and fear drove that companionship away as well.

Men and women in a leadership position often believe that no one understands the issues and challenges they face; they can be particularly prone to the perils of isolation. One of my friends is dealing with the consequences of a devastating phase of life in which he had an extramarital affair that ended his marriage. By his own account, the single factor that most contributed to his moral failure was that he began to withdraw from accountability relationships and become secretive. He didn't return calls, didn't answer messages. He cut off the people who would ask the hard questions and help him tackle the difficult issues. In that vacuum, danger was unavoidable.

We all need a handful of confidants with whom we can process life. We were never intended to live as the lone ranger. We need community, no matter what it looks like. Without it, no one influences us for the better and we have no one to influence.

Using People *for* Personal Gain

Another manifestation of influenza is actually an outgrowth of self-interest, but it deserves a category all its own because of its devastating impact on personal influence. I know I have been guilty of manipulating people for my own benefit, and I think most of us would admit to

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having done it at one time or another. Saul elevated this process to an art form, until few relationships were untainted by his selfish motivation. Not even his own family was spared. Driven by hatred and fear of David, Saul used both his son Jonathan and his daughter Michal to try to end David's life and eliminate the perceived threat to his throne.

During the five years we were the stewards of Life@Work (our company, dedicated to helping people integrate their faith and their professional lives), we were privileged to work with an incredible number of men and women of faith across the country. But we made an observation and learned a lesson early. From the outset, we had people of amazing influence put their clout to work on behalf of our undertaking, with no expectation of anything in return. One such person was Bob Briner, a tremendous spokesman for the faith-work movement and the author of *Roaring Lambs,* a catalyst in generating conversation about the subject for the last ten years. Bob has had an incredible influence on a number of men and women, and at the outset of Life@Work we called him out of the clear blue to ask for his input in our enterprise. To our joy, he responded with grace and open arms. We made a pilgrimage to Greenville, Illinois, where Bob was a college professor. He spent several days with us then and numerous hours on the phone with us afterward, helping us shape and understand the world of faith and work without a shred of expectation of personal gain. Bob has since passed away, but the selfless generosity of his life continues to be part of his ongoing legacy to us and countless others.

Another individual who leaned into the Life@Work effort was Bob Buford, author of the book *Halftime* and (like Bob Briner) a pioneer of the faith-work movement. Bob had developed key relationships in this area all over the country, and he let us use his list of contacts to spread awareness of Life@Work. He'd never done this before, and it made a huge difference in our getting the word out. Both these men, and many other individuals, shamelessly got behind our wagon and helped us pushed Life@Work without wanting anything in return.

But as we got off the ground, an interesting thing happened. Our phone began ringing off the wall with people interested in working with us or associating with us. Without fail, they fell into two categories: those who expected to benefit personally, and those who didn't. We developed a sixth sense that allowed us to spot someone with self-

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ish motivation in fifteen seconds. In their attitude, their language, and their questions, they seemed to be saying, "If I attach myself to this endeavor, it will be good for me." We tried to avoid working with these people, and this is often the result of using people as a tool for self-advancement. We may think we can use people to expand our influence, but in the end this kind of behavior only diminishes our clout.

Knowingly Doing Wrong

Shortly into his reign, Saul began to become deceitful and disobedient to God. It began with isolated incidents, but soon outright rebellion was his habit and lifestyle. We can see the beginning of this cycle in I Samuel 15, when God, through the prophet Samuel, tells Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites. Saul instead spares the Amalekite king and the best livestock. When Samuel challenges Saul, he argues, rationalizes his behavior, shifts the blame to his soldiers, and then tries to twist the entire episode into a sacrifice and worship experience. It doesn't work, and God takes the kingdom away from Saul.

Knowingly doing wrong is evidence of a steady downward regression toward influenza. It begins with small things and progresses until eventually we have a hard time telling right from wrong; the line becomes blurred. It's not really blurred, but we can't see it clearly anymore. This process chips away at our ethos—our believability—in large part because it erodes our self-respect. There's something refueling to the spirit about a moral victory. Doing the right thing creates an aroma of attractiveness to others and establishes the moral foundation for our ability to influence.

Failure *to* Deal *with* Unresolved Conflict

Saul turned into a self-destructive wrecking crew by sabotaging his personal relationships and avoiding resolution of conflict, which was devastating for his personal influence. He developed a petty jealousy of young David, which turned into a full-blown hurricane of malice and revenge once David's popularity overshadowed that of Saul. When they returned from battle, the people sang in the streets, "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands" (I Samuel 18:7). Saul's jealousy became so extreme that he tried to kill David three times.

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In the New Testament, Jesus addresses interpersonal conflict and how it should be handled:

> Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.
>
> You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you [Matthew 5:23–26, 38–42].

From these verses we can draw several principles of relational restoration:

• *Make relational harmony a high priority.* This means addressing conflict quickly and not allowing discord to gain a foothold. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

• *Take the initiative in reconciliation.* It doesn't matter whether you did the harming or were harmed. We can't make conflict go away by ignoring it.

• *Avoid revenge at all cost.* Charles Swindoll, in his book *Joseph: From Pit to Pinnacle*, gives us from the life of Joseph a glimpse of how we should handle people who harm us:

> No one who does a serious study of Joseph's life would deny that he was a great man. And yet he never accomplished any of the things we normally associate with biblical greatness. He never slew a giant. He never wrote a line of Scripture or made any vast prophetic predictions like Daniel. Come to think of

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> it, Joseph never even performed a single miracle. He was just your typical boy next door who grew up in a very troubled family.
>
> So what made Joseph great? Why does God devote more space in Genesis to his story than to any other patriarch? Because of Joseph's attitude, how he responded to difficult circumstances. That was the most remarkable thing about him.
>
> American author Elbert Hubbard once wrote, "The final proof of greatness lies in being able to endure contemptuous treatment without resentment." Joseph spent a good deal of his life enduring hardship, hateful treatment, and his attitude during those years offers indisputable proof of his greatness.

If anyone had justification for revenge, it was Joseph. But he didn't seek it, and God honored him for it. An attitude of vengefulness consumes our energy and drains our relationships. It cuts our influence platform out from under us and leaves us with nothing but solitude and empty bitterness.

- *Go the second mile in forgiveness and kindness.* Addressing conflict gives us the opportunity not only to mend the damage but to make the relationship even stronger.

Paralysis *with* Past Failure

As we discussed in Chapter Six, we all experience failure; it's unavoidable. But how we handle that failure determines whether our influence suffers or grows as a result of it. A serious hindrance to our clout is inability to move on. We become fixated on the failure instead of accepting God's ready forgiveness and mercy. Saul experienced failure but couldn't shake it.

We all fail, but we don't have to be paralyzed by it. We have to deal with it and move on, as Paul says, "forgetting what is behind you and straining toward what is ahead" (Philippians 3:13). Forgetting doesn't mean denying wrongdoing and failure. But after we accept it and deal with it, we move on down the road with renewed purpose and conviction. Steve Farrar, in *Finishing Strong,* quotes the famous abolitionist and minister Henry Ward Beecher: "It is defeat that turns bone to flint, and gristle to muscle, and makes people invincible, and

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forms those heroic natures that are now in ascendancy in the world. Do not, then, be afraid of defeat. You are never so near to victory as when defeated in a good cause."

Inability *to* Effect Transition Leadership

One thing that put Saul on the fast track downward was his refusal to accept that someone else would be the next king of Israel. It literally drove him crazy, until he was hurling spears at shadows in corners. Although Saul took this lack of transitional ability to an extreme, it has plagued many a leader's influence. Founders especially seem to have trouble with transition.

I know of a founder of a national ministry (not a household name) who outlived his effectiveness and would not pass the baton at the appointed time. It was obvious to everyone but him that it needed to happen, but the people who brought this up to him eventually found themselves cut off. The entrenched leader brought in new faces who would tell him that he still "had it." This leader ended up destroying much of what he had built in his years of peak influence.

A leader's refusal to let someone else take the reins is common, but it happens regularly in churches, nonprofit organizations, universities, and first-generation companies. This type of organization is often centered on someone who has enough wealth or vision to build a self-generating organization; that position can be especially difficult to transition out of.

Reliance *on* Death *to* Resolve Life's Mistakes

Though he battled them all his life, the Philistines were not Saul's worst enemy. Saul himself was his own worst enemy. When he came up against the wall at the end of his life and saw no hope, no chance to undo the wrong he had done and caused, the downward spiral of his life that led to the death of his own sons, he took the only option he could think of: he fell on his sword to end his life.

Using death as a last-ditch effort is not always as dramatic as Saul's action, but it is still quite common. Many people hope that on their dying day they can spread money around to cover their wrongs and reverse the direction their influence took during life. Many people

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write a letter on their deathbed hoping it will act as a magic bullet to put everything right. It rarely works. The time to have influence is during life.

Modern-Day Sauls

The story of Saul's downfall was quite visible and has been recorded as a warning for all students of the Bible. Not all of us show our symptoms so clearly, but they are there nonetheless. Some of the worst cases of influenza are found in the same place as the best examples of influence: the church, the family, sports, the classroom. For many people, these areas of life are an anchor for positive, healthy influence. Many who are asked to identify the top influencers in their life would name a minister, a parent, a coach, or a teacher. However, for others, these are the very sources from which influenza is contracted.

Recent disclosures of sexual abuse in the Catholic church and the repressive legalism of some fundamentalist churches are evidence of the diseased people within. The same goes for the family, when a parent, a sibling, or another relative abuses trust and does and says horrible things to another member. Some coaches have been known to verbally or physically abuse their players or resort to other damaging methods in an attempt to win at all costs. When a teacher violates the trust and integrity of a teacher-student relationship or fails to tap into a student's motivation, positive influence unravels.

The pages of modern history tell of one of the most chilling cases of influenza ever, in which unchecked evil introduced itself in human form and overshadowed the lives of Russia's Czar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra, and eventually the whole empire.

Nicholas II and Alexandra desperately wanted a son and an heir, but not long after their boy was born, they learned that he had hemophilia, a deadly blood disease that could snatch his life away at any time. Doctors could do little for the boy, and the czar and his wife lived in constant fear of their son's death. Into this sorrowful situation stepped Grigori Rasputin, an uneducated peasant who dabbled in mysticism and shady religious practices that combined spiritual fervor with sexual indulgence. He prayed for the boy, and to everyone's surprise the boy improved dramatically, though temporarily. Again Rasputin prayed, and again the child rallied. Even today the nature of

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these healings is not understood, but they are documented by multiple historical sources. They solidly locked in Rasputin's clout with the royal family, especially with Alexandra.

Rasputin claimed that the heir to the throne would live only so long as Alexandra complied with his orders. His influence became so strong that he could bring about approval or dismissal of any individual in the government. If someone expressed suspicion about Rasputin's role, he was tossed out of court and replaced with an appointee whose unscrupulousness and greed matched Rasputin's own. As a result, the entire political system lurched under the influence of this unwise and evil man, who came to be known as the Mad Monk of Russia. Eventually the empire fell into chaos, setting the stage for a bloody revolution that resulted in the murder of the royal family and ultimately the establishment of the communist coup. Some have speculated that if Rasputin's corrupt influence had not entered the picture, Lenin could not have come to power.

We hope there aren't many Rasputins-in-the-making out there, but this story is a disquieting reminder of the dangers in allowing influenza to go unchecked and untreated. Chaos and destruction, whether of the spirit or an entire empire, are often the result.

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Key Points

- We metaphorically use the word *influenza*, which is related to *influence* (remember that the Latin *influere* means to flow in) to describe influence gone bad. With good influence, the positive traits of one person flow into another individual. With bad influence, the negative traits of one person flow into another, just as an infectious influenza virus attacks the respiratory system.
- Influenza is characterized by one or more of these traits:

  Unbridled self-interest. Arrogance and uncontrolled egotism are incredibly unattractive to people around us; both personal experience and research prove those traits to be anathema to the good-influence process.

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Closed-minded stubbornness. If we plant our feet and refuse to accept outside feedback, we short-circuit the influence system.

Rash impulsiveness. People have trouble trusting or placing their confidence in someone who has a reputation for not thinking matters through or changing mind and direction quickly.

Isolation and secrecy. We need other people around us to do life well, in terms of accountability and encouragement. Men and women who pull back and withdraw from this kind of positive relationship compromise their ability to be a positive influence.

Using people for personal gain. Manipulating people for inappropriate personal benefit and gain is devastating to the perpetrator and the target.

Knowingly doing wrong. Deceit and willful disobedience often begins with small things and over time progresses into a full downward spiral. It is not good to be around people evidencing this pattern of behavior; the process consistently erodes their ethos and ability to influence positively.

Failure to deal with unresolved conflict. Avoiding resolution of conflict sabotages personal relationships and makes positive influence difficult. Scripture recommends (1) making relational harmony a high priority, (2) taking the initiative in reconciliation, (3) avoiding revenge, and (4) going the extra mile in forgiveness and kindness.

Paralysis with past failure. Failure is unavoidable, but how we deal with it makes all the difference in whether, and how, our influence grows.

Inability to effect transition in leadership. A leader's refusal to let someone else take the reins—or admit that sooner or later he or she will no longer be in the leadership position—is a common malady that dials the influence meter down.

Reliance on death to resolve life's mistakes. If we believe that money to be distributed or the plans to be executed on our death will solve what we are unable to confront while living, we are kidding ourselves about the extent of our positive influence.