What do we want from our leaders and on what criteria do we judge strong leadership? These are the questions Malcolm Gladwell explored in the opening session of the MGMA 2010 annual conference Sunday night.

One natural answer to these questions, said Gladwell, the best-selling author of “The Tipping Point” and writer for The New Yorker, is that we want a leader who is an expert, one who has the benefit of all the information necessary to make informed decisions. In general, people believe that expertise and knowledge represent strong leadership.

However, expertise, Gladwell argued, is exactly what can lead to the downfall of leaders. It's the overconfidence of experts that can result in spectacular mistakes. Gladwell made this point by drawing on a few incidents in American history—tragic events that were in many ways brought on by the overconfidence of the leaders involved. It was overconfidence that resulted in the spectacular defeat of Union Army Maj. General Joe Hooker’s army by the Confederate army in 1863's Battle of Chancellorsville, a loss made all the more bitter because Hooker’s forces outnumbered General Robert E. Lee's men two to one. But Hooker's bloated hubris and certainty that he would win (brought on by what he thought was an overwhelming amount of information about the battlefield and his opponent) led to his downfall.

More recently, the financial collapse on Wall Street, Gladwell argued, was caused entirely by experts who were given the tools that made them believe they had all the information. This led to overconfidence, and later to the collapse.

"We don't think much about expert failure," Gladwell said. "But it will be the defining kind of failure." He continued by explaining that failures of expertise are far more frightening than those of incompetence, as experts are often in a position to make mistakes that can have far greater consequences.

"As you give an expert more and more information on a project, does their decision making get better?" Gladwell questioned. As it turns out, no. In fact, studies have found that there's a limit to how much additional information will benefit a leader or decision maker. "We greatly overestimate the value of marginal information," he said.

These same lessons from the Battle of Chancellorsville and the financial collapse translate well as the country is on the cusp of healthcare reform. When looking to our leadership in the future of healthcare, Gladwell said, we think what we want is the benefit of expertise.

"It's not," he said. "We want their humility."

What do you think about his take on leadership? Do you think it's an apt conclusion in the context of healthcare reform?

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