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Discernment (Chapter Three of Faithful Education: Themes and Values for Teaching, Learning, and Leading)

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Discernment

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If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. (Philippians 2:1–4, MSG)

HUMANKIND CONTINUES TO NEED such encouragement as the Apostle Paul gave to those living in Philippi around AD 61—living like Christ while acting like humans is sometimes paradoxical. Thus, this reminder is warranted in calling people to be mindful of the interests of others in our actions of living out our lives. Discernment in making decisions is an important biblical theme, given the fact that most of us act and interact as part of a larger community whether as a citizen, as an employee, or as a member of a family. The premise of this book is that Christians educators have something to say to encourage others in private and public settings that is informed by our life in Christ: to live life first as a follower of Christ and then as teachers, administrators, counselors, or school psychologists in our profession, which may also be our calling.

The theme of this chapter centers on leaders who enlarge conversations during decision making, understand situations more clearly from multiple perspectives, and thus make better decisions for organizations. But, this process is more than simply relying on our human abilities, knowledge, and personalities to discern what is best. Inviting God into the decision-making process both strengthens decisions and strengthens people, together in community. This biblical theme is found in 1 Corinthians 12:7–8: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge . . . , to another faith by the same Spirit . . .” We are stronger together by faithfully using Christ’s gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Paul assures us that when we live like Christ, his Spirit brings gifts to our lives that bear fruit. These gifts help us to understand and employ many of the themes contained in this book, not just for the common good, but also for the glory of God (Galatians 5:22–23).

David encouraged his son with a similar focus on the common good when he charged Solomon to ask God for discernment to understand and know how best to lead Israel. Solomon, who would eventually be known as the wisest king of all, was encouraged to lead with a commitment to follow God. David spoke a word of blessing to Solomon that his leadership “. . . will have success if you are careful to observe the decrees and laws that the LORD gave Moses for Israel. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged” (1 Chronicles 22:13). As this scripture illustrates, through faithfully listening to God’s Spirit and with compassionate care for others, humans are capable of producing good and fruitful decisions in difficult situations when we strive to seek a clearer understanding.

School leaders have always worked to find strategies to communicate difficult decisions and to address perceptions of what constitutes transparent and open lines of dialogue—perceptions are reality, especially when it involves whether or not others believe they are properly informed or think they are correctly heard. It is from this context that I began considering the biblical theme of discernment and its application in the decision-making process employed by school leaders. As my thinking about discernment progressed through presentations and discussions with peers, who are preparing future leaders for service in schools, it became evident that discernment first begins in situations where we are challenged to understand how to provide adequate space for the conversation, and is then shaped by accurately determining when and anticipating which voices to invite.

Ideas from thinking about the how, when, and whom will come later in this chapter—for now it is important to clearly establish the focus as setting parameters for discernment in decision making and then to properly define discernment in the context of community where most educational decisions happen.

For the purpose of examining the biblical theme of discernment, I have chosen to focus on discernment in decision-making processes used by leaders in the school community. There are many pertinent examples that could be used in a chapter such as this, whether understanding how best to present a difficult lesson in the classroom or knowing the right words to diffuse a difficult situation with parents in the front office—in essence praying for God's guidance to give you a creative idea or just the right words. These are important tasks in our work as educators, but they tend to be limited to resolving a specific situation in a classroom or an issue with a specific family. It is important to remind readers to seek God's help in discerning how to best accomplish these tasks. But the focus of this chapter is on encouraging leaders to seek God's help to discern, to best understand and know how to resolve important, big-picture challenges. It is in this crucial work that discerning properly leads to making wise decisions for the common good—making knowledgeable decisions that represent all members of a school community.

DISCERNMENT IN DECISION MAKING DEFINED

Discernment is defined as the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure; and the ability to see and understand people, things, or situations clearly and intelligently (Merriam-Webster Online)—through a keenness of intellectual perception (*Oxford Universal Dictionary*). Discernment assumes a certain knowledge or wisdom to apply perceptions appropriately when faced with dilemmas or difficult decisions. In situations that can significantly change an individual or an organization, discernment in decision making is more about taking time to keenly shape an informed judgment than to make hasty decrees.

This is where the important work of making decisions, which press the organization and its people to change, requires leaders to open up the process of discernment, especially in adaptive challenges as described by Ronald Heifetz (1994). But, leaders sometimes misinterpret interests of efficacy, efficiency, and expertise—repeating self-serving phrases such as ‘I

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am the leader, so I must have the answers’—over encouraging decisions that are beneficial and fruitful to others. The “tyranny of the urgent” (Hummel, 1967) and self-promotion wins the day, instead of purposeful planning to make prudent decisions in a spirit of collaboration. It takes additional planning time and space to invite voices into the boardroom and into the principal’s office, but it requires ample time and space to listen and discern well during the decision-making process, which can result in moving in a direction most meaningful and beneficial to the organization.

DECISION MAKING IN A BIBLICAL CONTEXT OF DISCERNMENT

It is important to define additional terms from a biblical perspective, as the term discernment can hold a spiritual connotation in the context of religious organizations (Fendall, Wood & Bishop, 2007). This allows room for believers to bring the spiritual into the perceived secular area of decision making, which is not predominant in the workplace. Although this context can be informed by the Christian view of the world, it is more a biblical implication for an educational process than an argument made from a theological perspective. This Christian worldview or belief informs our actions that pervade our work here at George Fox University: Christ is present in each of us, so Christ is present in our work. The term Christian, as used here, refers to one who believes in Jesus Christ; places one’s faith, trust and obedience in Christ; is a Christ follower.

Our challenge as Christians is to stay involved in the decision-making process of our communities, whether the organization is Christian or not. For readers who are not in an organization that values faith, or specifically the Christian practice of discernment, the work of Parker Palmer (1998–1999) in the Seattle Public Schools is well documented, through the Teacher Formation Program. But, in my work of collaborating with private school leaders, honoring teacher voices and encouraging shared decision making is not always a strong standard just because the word “Christian” is on the side of the school’s building or at the top of its letterhead.

Those who are followers of Christ have an additional responsibility in living a Christ-like life serving others and obeying God in that we are called to consider the interests of the others in decision making as encouraged by Paul in Philippians 2:4. Discernment in decision making, like one’s calling, should arise from a strongly held personal belief where one is led by

Christ to see things clearly and to use our God-given talents and intellect to discern or perceive important mysteries. Being willing and able to take the next step of discernment by persuading colleagues to consider others' interests can lead to a breakthrough—this clarity of vision can help others see a solution within a difficult situation, and work with persistence to resolve a difficult challenge.

Discussion Questions

How do I bring the sacred into the secular in my work?

What spiritual disciplines are important to our community, and how do we reflect those in our practices?

INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT IN WORKPLACE DECISIONS

Individuals desire an opportunity to participate fully, or at least to the level of one's choosing, in the workplace, including organizational decision making. Work that is meaningful and rewarding creates satisfied workers (Sergiovanni, 1992), and processes that encourage shared decision making improve the opportunity to hear a broader range of voices speaking into decisions. Kutcher, Bragger, Rodriguez-Srednicki, and Masco (2010) researched the connection between faith and employee satisfaction and commitment to the workplace, invoking the term “organizational citizenship behavior” (p. 319). As Kutcher et al. suggest, these organizational behaviors are informed by employees’ “religious beliefs (that) form their self-identities and guide their actions and decisions” (p. 335). Along this line, James Madison once stated, “In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights” (Madison, 1788). This perspective also implies that proper self-government means pursuing opportunities for active and meaningful involvement in the workplace, and subsequently in its decisions. However, these actions should not be simply a matter of preference or come about by proclaiming a right; fruitful participation is really a moral obligation conducted out of one's sense of duty as an organizational citizen.

The English word ‘citizen’ is derived from the Latin word *civitas*, which is similar to ‘civic.’ If government is the structure or function of authority

and controls to govern one's actions, then self-government is one's personal responsibility to control personal actions and private rights within corporate government, such as we accept by living as a citizen in a country and working in community with others within any organization. Citizenship is an important educational goal; citizens, who exercise individual rights especially by participating in decision making, enable society to benefit from their understanding and knowledge.

The Roman stoic-philosopher, statesman Cicero (106–43 BC), argued that rights and responsibilities of citizens were moral and natural, over legal and man-made, to be lived out in community within a social contract. This is an important distinction because personal action, regarding the virtues of wisdom (knowledge of both the divine and human) and prudence (the practical application of wisdom), is so important a theme to Cicero that he emphasized this concept of private care for the public good in a letter to his son referenced in his essay, *On Duty*:

But that wisdom, which I have stated to be the chief, is the knowledge of things divine and human, which comprehends the fellowship of gods and men, and their society within themselves . . . it follows of course that the duty resulting from this fellowship is the highest of all duties. For the knowledge and contemplation of nature is in a manner lame and unfinished, if it is followed by no activity; now activity is most perspicuous when it is exerted in protecting the rights of mankind [care for the well-being of mankind]. (p. 113)

Living in community is what we are naturally created by God to do (Grenz, 1998), from the time of the first family. This purpose is reinforced by our country's unique declaration that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776). When leaders are aware of individual interests to meaningfully participate in decision making then employee satisfaction and well-being results. This phenomenon of including people in processes of discernment is popularly referred to as employee buy-in or more recently as vetting a decision, which improves the quality of organizational decisions, the quality of implementing those decisions by its employees, and eventually the quality of the place where individuals work.

The theory of site-based management and the practice of shared decision making is up for debate as to what degree it is present in an environment of high-stakes accountability and within the “buck-stops-here” mentality of boards of directors, but it does strengthen decisions by bringing them to the level where most decisions are implemented. Participatory decision making within a community not only values principles of a free society, it limits negative perceptions that decisions are being made “without our input,” from the top down, which can have a detrimental effect on employee satisfaction, organizational culture, and workplace climate. Shared decision making also ensures that individuals flourish to be blessed and happy within an organization that values expertise, wisdom, and knowledge of others by inviting discernment into the process of making decisions—and encourages positive behavior from more of its citizens.

Discussion Questions

How willing am I to participate in decision making, and how willing am I to invest necessary time to listen well to others?

How do we respond when someone questions our decision-making process, or expresses concern that a decision was made without input?

UNDERSTANDING DISCERNMENT IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

An open and transparent decision-making process not only establishes controls to check power in educational organizations, it also creates opportunities for leaders to listen well to the needs of others. As most American schools exist to provide a service of educating children and adults, schools operate within a society that values, but does not mandate, individual participation in decision making, such as voting in a general election. Proper discernment includes an open process to create opportunities for students’ voices to be heard in major classroom or school-wide policies and procedures, especially as they progress through to the post-secondary level.

Perhaps schools can respond to limit the criticism that ‘my voice and opinions don’t matter’ by teaching and modeling the fact that self-government can and does make a difference through practicing the discipline of

public involvement in community decisions. As most teachers and administrators are products of the American system of education, it follows that staff members in most schools expect an invitation to participate in decisions—to be part of the discernment in decision-making processes. Fruitful leaders discern what type of decisions to open up through an invitation to participate and which decisions are best made through a streamlined process.

As stated previously, an accepted goal of education is to ensure that children become productive and successful members of society—modeling that children have a voice in some classroom decisions may translate to increased participation in a society’s organizations as adults. John Amos Comenius is noted for influencing the reform of human society through education, including the eventual system of American schooling. His was a world in the seventeenth century where religious and political strivings for allegiance and power led to war after war, instead of a society marked by a spirit of collaboration and discernment that shaped important decisions. This strife led to his philosophical foundation of pansophy (a universal wisdom or knowledge) in hopes of ending war or at least not perpetually fighting wars to resolve conflicts.

In his book, *The Great Didactic* (*Didactica Magna*), Comenius (1649) contended that “. . . the whole of the human race may become educated, men of all ages, all conditions, both sexes and all nations,” which would mean that “. . . all men should be educated to full humanity—to rationality, morality, and happiness” (p. 11). He hoped this social reform led by education would lead to a unity of humanity by asserting:

I call a school that fulfills its function perfectly, one which is a true forging-place: where the minds of those who learn are illuminated by the light of wisdom, so as to penetrate with ease all that is manifest and all that is secret, where the emotions and the desires are brought into harmony with virtue, and where the heart is filled with and permeated by divine love, so that all who are handed over to Christian schools to be imbued with true wisdom may be taught to live a heavenly life on earth; in a word, where all men are taught all things thoroughly. (p. 14)

Perhaps an education to “full humanity—to rationality, morality, and happiness” means an education that leads one to live as Christ in this world, but for what end? As an educational reformer John Comenius was far ahead of his time in viewing that a quality education could lead to a changed world.

He believed that teachers should understand how a child's mind develops and learns, which caused him to be convinced that all children should attend school and receive the same education about the civilization in which they live, so that they could understand and know how best to solve problems in society. In the same way, understanding and recognizing this important role and responsibility, which involvement in decision making offers people in a free society, should cause leaders to adopt a process that supports and encourages open discernment in decision making, to help people 'fulfill their function perfectly.'

A century after Comenius, this foundation of education was continued by James Madison (1788), who penned *The Federalist No. 51*, a paper titled *The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments*. Like Comenius, Madison saw the frailty of humans and stressed the importance of education through writings that proposed adding an element of checks and balances through government designed to ensure that the means of power and control lead to higher ends in society's decision making. More specifically, Madison stated, "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary" (1788). Long before Madison realized the limits of human virtue, Paul wrote to remind his readers that, "Each of you should look not only to your interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

As we continue to think about discernment in the light of educational and political thinkers, we follow Comenius and Madison's line of reasoning that both these structures are important for life. We observe that governance structures in educational organizations are basic hierarchies—where boards control superintendents, superintendents control principals, principals control teachers, and teachers control students. These dual structures of education to fully develop human functioning and of government to control human shortcomings then require that people in each of these roles of authority see the need for establishing checks on making unilateral decisions, which serve to limit participation through self-serving interests for power.

People within organizations trust leaders to make decisions for them and for the good of others—to some just doing the work as assigned is satisfying enough. Others perceive that to live fully within an organization means being able to create, innovate, or to participate actively in decisions

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that will affect them personally. In this case, being included in a process to discern the best decision becomes more of a duty and a moral responsibility that can only be fulfilled by being able to participate in a discernment process. It is important learning to act on one's belief that opinions do matter, and more importantly believing that God may be speaking wisdom into the process of discerning the right course of action through individual members of the organization.

LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS FOR DISCERNMENT IN DECISION-MAKING

Understanding, recognizing, or anticipating that involvement in decision-making processes matters to some people are leadership skills best accomplished by an active and involved leader. If a leader accepts the premise that an individual's obligation to weigh-in on a decision should be recognized and protected, then there are leadership implications that are best informed through discerning the most appropriate style, skills, and decision-making process to implement as a leader by putting leadership theory into practice.

Leadership Style

Perhaps, servant leadership provides the best model for discernment in decision making. Robert Greenleaf (1977) implies that the complete range of human nature is reflected in the continuum between leader-first behavior, striving to achieve personal power or gain, and servant-first behaviors. This perspective requires leaders to strive for a more balanced approach or style:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 27)

Effective and successful leaders are those who best understand and know the needs of others and measure success through the lens of personal and professional growth of all people within the organization (Luthans, 2010). Leaders who encourage others to participate in decision making to resolve

challenging situations ensure a broader understanding and knowledge that open the door to wisdom during this type of discernment process.

Larry Spears continued directing the work of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership after Greenleaf's death. Spears introduced the book he edited, *The Power of Servant Leadership* (Greenleaf, 1998), depicting how he sifted through the writings of Greenleaf to identify "ten characteristics of the servant leader" (p. 5), which shape leaders to lead from a servant-first perspective. The top two characteristics that Spears references for servant leadership are listening; "communication and decision-making skills . . . reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others" and persuasion, defined as a

reliance on persuasion, rather than on one's positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups. (p. 6)

Perhaps the major implication of using discernment in decision making is in the area of professional growth and development of leaders: both principal and teacher leaders. We tend to teach as we have been taught, so it follows that most of us lead in a style in which we have been led. Servant leadership is becoming more prevalent and utilizes a style of behaving as a leader that causes a leader to consider the interests of others, which in turn requires a leader to be willing to ask and then listen to others in the process for discernment in decision making.

Leadership Skills

Discerning when and how to create space and to plan time for shared decision making are important leadership skills, along with understanding who needs to be at the table. Fred Luthans (1988) researched the day-to-day work of managers to determine that effective principals operate mainly in two traditional management domains resulting in an organizational culture marked by high satisfaction, commitment, and performance: 1) completing tasks requiring content and craft knowledge; and 2) developing human resources through interpersonal relationships. However, these were not necessarily skills that resulted in the successful principal being

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promoted to positions “up and out”—up the organizational ladder based on understanding political landscapes and working the system leading to moving out of building-level leadership. But, effective and successful leaders also are able to understand the implications for involving others in decision-making processes by developing relationships within and outside of the school. A balanced leadership approach is one where leaders use skills to understand what needs to be done, know how best to accomplish organizational goals, and communicate this process to others: parents, teachers, and students (Luthans, 2010).

Discerning Which Type of Process

Although developing a style and utilizing skills conducive to positive behavior allow leaders to move from theory into fruitful practices, so does the ability to know and understand how to move from a traditional model of managing technical decisions. Challenges that will require an organization to adapt and change require an organization to use a more collaborative process of discernment in decision making. Ronald Heifetz (1994) addresses the difference between resolving technical challenges versus those situations that create adaptive challenges; it is through understanding and knowing these differences that leaders can provide a process leading to better discernment, which leads to making better decisions. These technical challenges can cause frustration and discomfort within an organization for a short period of time, but most people associated with the organization know that the expertise and resolve to find a solution already exists. An adaptive challenge is one that causes the organization to invest more time and attention to find a resolution because it is one that will result in significant change for individuals within the organization. Perhaps there is no decision that requires more discernment than a challenge that the school has not faced before or, worse yet, one where people are not yet aware of potential pitfalls and unintended consequences by making quick or wrong decisions.

Technical Challenges Require Technical Decisions

One mistake that leaders make is to convene a staff meeting to invite input on how to solve or discern technical challenges. It is in the process of making these decisions that leaders quickly find most people don't want

to be involved or someone wants to be involved to a level that creates an entirely different challenge. For example, determining the bell schedule or class schedule is usually a technical challenge that is influenced by assessing available space in the facility, considering bus transportation systems including parent drop-off or pick-up procedures, working on the master-schedule logistics to resolve scheduling conflicts of teachers and rooms, or determining the time it takes students to move between classrooms with fewest disruptions. Convening a large meeting to hear from a variety of voices can only complicate this decision-making process. If the school leadership team knows what the issue is and technically how to best resolve it, then it becomes less difficult to determine who to invite to make the best decision to change the bell or class schedule. Most teachers trust administrators to convene the group that needs to be around the table, so decisions like this are often made in the summer before the school year starts. In the case of challenges requiring a technical solution, encouraging more people to get involved or lengthening the time to make sure opportunities for discernment happen will not result in making a better decision, but might lead to more frustration caused by people having to wait for something to happen.

In the area of technical decisions where the organization knows how best to resolve the situation, an open and transparent process is still beneficial to relieve the short-term frustration that people face, but the answer does not require much discernment as it is usually obvious once a small group collects data and analyzes the facts of the situation—a consensus decision-making model will only serve to add frustration within the organization. Most of these technical decisions come down to leaders just doing what leaders are supposed to do, so don't confuse the issue by acting in a way that suggests there may be larger implications that will change the organization through a long, drawn out process. The resolution is the key to stabilizing the temporary stress and it often provides a rewardable moment to recognize the good work of the person or team that resolved the challenge so quickly.

These are usually those decisions where people expect the leader to lead, and, as such, these challenges should be resolved sooner and more efficiently with less input needed to discern the best solution. By involving more people than is needed to resolve a technical challenge, the leader opens up the possibility that trust will be broken. Most evaluations of a leader's performance, both formally and informally, are based on the

degree to which the leader does what has been promised or expected. Even though perception is reality in assessing this standard, personal integrity or lack thereof is either affirmed or laid out for all to see and judge. When people are asked for their input and they rightfully take time to participate in the process, the leader is often confronted with choosing competing options. So instead of picking one, the leader makes a different decision creating the appearance that the leader already determined the decision and wasted time asking for individual input. Since little discernment is needed to resolve a technical challenge, I have observed where this error can cause fewer people to get involved in future decision-making processes. This is especially detrimental when important decisions arise that could change the structure of an organization.

Adaptive Challenges Require Discerned Decisions

It is in these decisions, where people within the organization will be required to adapt, that leaders make consequential mistakes. Leaders unaware of when to convene a process to encourage discernment, try to apply the same process as used in technical challenges. The leader has potentially lost trust before the decision-making process lifts off the ground, as a select group is convened to make a hasty decision to get on with more important stuff. Those decisions to address challenges that will significantly change an organization are best made through a strategically planned process, allowing for additional time and space to hear multiple perspectives.

For the purpose of discussing a scenario that creates an adaptive challenge for a school, let's assume that we are rethinking the bell or class schedule because we are considering a move to proficiency-based education at a secondary school or in blended grade levels at an elementary school. This consideration changes the challenge from a technical decision to one that will create a change in the school's basic structure: the classroom. Immediately, there will be questions of why this change is being considered and who will make the final decision, which is a good indication that this will require people within the community to adapt to a significant change; it is more than just deciding how to adjust the bells, so it requires a discernment process to include perspectives representative of all groups within the organization. It will also require leaders to anticipate who to include in the decision-making process, or others who may be impacted by this decision within and outside of the school community.

Without addressing the details that would take leaders within a school system at least a couple of months to plan in process alone, I provide a couple of considerations to demonstrate the magnitude of such an adaptive challenge. This also serves to reinforce why discernment needs to infuse the entire process within the context of shared decision making, a process that should be expanded far beyond what is required for making technical decisions. The initial level of planning relates to considering the immediate question posed by the community: Why? Prior to announcing the plan for the decision-making process, the teaching and support staff, parents, students, and the superintendent and governing board (if this change hasn't been directed by them), will want to hear the issue presented with facts and rationale for why the change is needed. This step is already evident in a technical challenge as those appear front and center begging to be resolved; a technical challenge is similar to getting a flat tire on your car as we don't have to know why it happened, but we need to know how to fix it to get back on the road as soon as possible.

An adaptive change is not so obvious, so even before answering the question of why, leaders should have floated the idea to prepare people within the community for change. Professional learning communities within schools provide staff time and resources to consider options. Common readings on the educational benefits to student learning and barriers to implementation provide an opportunity to look at the issue using a 360-degree approach (Hord, 1997). A town-hall concept with parent groups and meetings in the larger community can be beneficial to the process of presenting facts and the rationale, as well as providing a forum to listen to the perspectives of others. Perhaps the largest consideration requiring discernment in this decision will be the professional training required to implement such a change in instruction and content delivery; teachers will need to understand how proficiency-based learning at the middle school or in blended grade levels in our elementary classrooms will change teaching and learning. Most of all, this will take time and money, both precious resources for schools today. So, making sure that people have been part of a process to discern the best way forward is critical to prepare to best implement the decision.

Decisions leading to change is no less a time to lead. It is not a time to abdicate leadership responsibilities, as formal leaders are important to the success of implementing decisions (Elmore, 1979–80). Remember, adaptive challenges require multiple perspectives, and are best heard in

a decision-making process that includes time and space for discernment by people who want to participate in these decisions. These types of decisions require leaders to use a differentiated leadership style to discern which employees to invite into the discussion, and when and how to initiate the process based on the situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 2000). There is a tool to help leaders determine which staff members express interest in being involved in various roles of leadership, including participating in open decision-making processes (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006, p. 98). Expanding leadership opportunities to others who wish to participate in a process to discern the best way forward, a process typically limited to administrators, not only provides opportunities for multiple voices to be heard in the process of discernment, but reduces stress on administrators by lightening the load and isolation inherent with personally owning a unilateral decision.

This discernment process changes the context—from limiting understanding and restricting involvement in a decision by restricting the process to fewer eyes, ears, and brains to sharing the making of decisions to discern the best steps to resolve a situation. The willingness of leaders to change the process to include discernment in decision making results in stronger decisions that represent shared values more aligned to the organization's purpose as demonstrated by its mission and goals, both in its operations and in its decision-making process.

Discussion Questions

What is my preferred leadership style and what would people say is my actual leadership style—leader first or servant first, participatory or take-charge?

How do we decide whom to involve in our decision-making process?

Share a time when you participated in a collaborative decision, and describe the process and outcome.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DISCERNMENT IN DECISION-MAKING

Hopefully, presenting a perspective suggesting discernment in decision making is an encouragement—a call to consider the interests of others and to seek God’s guidance to make wise decisions. Leading from a style of acting as a servant first; responding effectively to adaptive challenges by properly understanding how these decisions will change and shape people within organizations; and incorporating spiritual disciplines in leadership experiences of everyday life is not necessarily a default perspective. Lest we make the mistake that faithful teaching invokes a narrow view that focuses on one faith tradition, many faith backgrounds facilitate discernment in decision making and teach that beliefs should inform daily practices.

In current discourse, there are those who would say that spiritual disciplines, such as discernment, have no place in the forum of public or even private conversations, including decision making. Seeing one’s actions as moral obligations—as a contributing member of society within organizations—is not a topic included in many leadership texts (Sergiovanni, 1996) and a viewpoint that can anger those who interpret any expression of faith as suspect in the public arena. A recent opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* quoted a United States representative, who cited teaching that has informed actions of individuals within civic organizations, churches, and charities dating back to 1891:

A person’s faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private. So to me, using my Catholic faith, we call it the social magisterium, which is how do you apply the doctrine of your teaching into your everyday life as a layperson . . . where we interact with people as a community, that’s how we advance the common good. (p. A15)

The unity that comes by living faithfully in alignment with Christ and others is not just theoretical but is foundationally practical; it should not be reserved for only religious roles, but in secular roles as it affirms that Christ is present in each of us, so Christ is present in our common work of caring for the common good through discernment in community decisions. It is the hope that we have in the message of the Gospel that teaches us to have faith in God and to act on that faith in working with others—to be lovers of God and lovers of people, as he promises to guide us with our decisions in life (Proverbs 3:6).

Art Kleiner (2008) uses religious nomenclature in his book, *The Age of Heretics*, to describe the work to move organizational behavior away from scientific measurements to social interactions where relationships matter. Moving to this relational process may cause one to pay more attention to the voice of the few who are discerning differently the best direction. And it may cause an organization to focus less on effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity and more on work that is meaningful, beneficial, and fruitful to measure success—measures that have faith-based roots, as presented in the letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:8) and others throughout the New Testament. Kurt Lewin (1939), whose social psychology theories shaped current perspectives on organizational culture, coined the term “democratic leadership” to describe skills leaders’ use through participatory decision making to positively encourage engagement and maintain motivation (Bavelas & Lewin, 1942). Again, as Thomas Sergiovanni (2006) postulates, “What is rewarding gets done” (p. 26), perhaps even with a better quality in the end than work that is rewarded.

In educating our children and in working together with other adults in the collaborative and relational work of education, ours is a twofold purpose. First, we strive to work well to prepare future generations with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be self-governed in a civilized society. But it is also an important endeavor to model listening to Christ to be led to work well with each other in making decisions based on a collective process of discerning together in community that seeks the “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Living as followers of Christ helps lead to unity and love, as later in 1 Corinthians, Paul describes the interworking of our body to compare this to our life in community, whether in churches or in schools. What is our motivation in expanding the voices in the room during those decisions that will lead to significant change in an organization? It may be that through listening well to God, it causes us to listen well to each other; listening with discernment to hear and see God in others persuades us to work together to make the best and most honorable decisions. Perhaps this will help humans flourish in this life to get the most out of a life of following Christ, leading to blessing and happiness.

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