

The Foundation of Discernment

Would you rather be led or managed? Most of us almost always prefer to be led, especially in our jobs and volunteer efforts. Sure sometimes we wish for the thoughtlessness found in just being told what to do, but the longing of the human heart – and perhaps one of the greatest longings especially in today's world – is to be led.



Things need to be managed, but people need to be led. I may manage how much time my son spends on the computer, but the charge of shaping his life calls for leadership. In fact my leading his life enables me to most effectively manage his time gaming. Consider this metaphor with regard to our organizations, and even our churches.

Concisely stated, transformational leadership is leading people in an organic but often strategic process of refining themselves in order to develop and strengthen their character, abilities, and potential. It is relational, inspirational, positive and relentlessly optimistic. In contrast, transactional leadership is a system where desired behavior is rewarded and undesirable isn't.

In a transactional world if you do what I want I affirm you. If you don't then I ignore or punish you. In a transformational world we journey together with my focus on contributing whatever I can to help you be the best you can be in all areas of life.

Transformational is servant-leadership and transactional is usury and manipulation. If you aren't sure which you dish out, create a safe place for your followers to tell you and listen – cause you may not know which kind of leader you are but they surely do.

Ok, perhaps enough of my favorite soapbox. And now for the point:

One of the best ways those in authority can become leaders, as opposed to managers, is to be as inclusive as possible. One of the ways to be as inclusive as possible is to invite others along in the process of reaching conclusions. In other words employ discernment rather than decision making. Sure, there are times the leader needs to just make a decision, but as often as possible transformational leaders will invite others into a process called discernment.

In typical organizations discernment is pooling the collective wisdom, experience, education, intuition, interests, and perspectives of a team. In cultures of faith discernment is different. Rather it is a group coming together believing that they have a Guide and as His "sheep" they can hear His voice (John 10:3). Discernment in the church is about faithfully calling on Him, seeking Him and finding Him and the direction He gives (Jeremiah 29:13). In church leadership discernment is about submitting your ideas, agendas, traditions, dreams and limited concepts to His limitless ambitions of your Author. For more about this read my article titled, "Are You Deciding or Discerning: You Decide."

Whether you engage discernment in your for-profit organization, church or volunteer group the following rules will build a healthy framework for it. Make sure everyone in the discernment process knows them and can live by them before beginning discussions, dialogues or even specific opening remarks. Consider the ability to live into these rules as a

prerequisite of participation. Post them on newsprint in the room during talks, include them in the invitation to participate and make them a handout to be taken home between meetings.

Ground Rules

1. All ideas are accepted.
2. All participants input is valued.
3. Conclusions will be made by consensus, not by vote.
4. Everyone is to encourage input from everyone.
5. Silence means agreement.
6. Everyone is responsible to speak up.
7. Everyone is responsible to encourage others to speak up.
8. Pray. Yep; give it a try.

It is important to stress that bad ideas and stupid questions do not exist. Everyone should be affirmed for whatever their thoughts, especially initially. Thoughts that are against organizational values or core principles (i.e. Scripture in church organizations) are kindly and gently corrected, but initially everyone's ideas are objectively welcomed. Inclusiveness and an authentic discernment process demands it.

After much dialogue, discussion and thorough questions and answers it becomes time to call for consensus. The following levels guide an assessment of everyone's "degrees" of consensus. This is how discernment lives into being an inclusive and relational process, differs from voting, and builds a transactional leadership environment.

Consensus Levels

1. I agree.
2. I don't agree with everything – but I can live with and support it.
3. I don't agree at all, but see most do agree and I can live with and support it.
4. I don't agree at all and can't live with it.

True consensus means no one is pressured, strong-armed or manipulated into avoid being "a four". When anyone who has been trusted to be included in the discernment process is "a four" then the process continues. Authentic discernment and consensus is relational enough to bring about this result. For more on this read article titled, "Are You Deciding or Discerning: You Decide."

I can't take credit for creating the discernment ground rules and levels of consensus. But I've seen them powerfully at work in groups as large as 48 with regard to eternally-impacting organization decisions. How can they help you? Well, that's a conversation I would love to have so contact me and let's get started.

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