

Toward the Establishment of Discernment Theory:  
A Phenomenological Study of  
Discernment in Strategic Leadership Decision Making  
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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study and learn the basis for discernment as a strategic leadership decision mechanism and whether it can be validated and mapped as a process due to the increased demand for spiritually minded leaders in the workforce (Ivancevich et al., 2011; Phipps, 2012; Yukl, 2010). Since discernment begins as a non-cognitive decision-making process, it requires structure and guidelines so that strategic leaders may feel secure in using or denying it. The scope of this research involves multiple levels of leaders from within the Foursquare denomination in the state of Kansas.

The primary questions being addressed are how discernment is used in strategic leadership decisions; whether discernment is part of, expands or replaces purely cognitive decision-making; whether discernment can be attributed to intuition or vice versa; and, the dynamics that exist when group discernment experiences agree with or contradict the individual participants. The effect of this research is to help identify possible flaws in decision making among constituents who rely on discernment so such flaws may be observed and avoided, and to identify ways to capitalize on discernment in the strategic leadership decision making process.

The results of this research yield multiple discernment observations, namely: a 13-step identifying process, diminishing factors, relational interests, self-awareness factors, the importance of backward looking, the involvement of anxiety aversion and observations on group dynamics.

### Toward the Establishment of Discernment Theory

Interest and concern regarding spirituality among leaders has increased both in the workplace and within professional organizations. For example, the Academy of Management began the Management, Spirituality and Religion Interest Group in 2001 initiating research of spirituality in the workplace (Ivancevich et al., 2011; Phipps, 2012). For spiritually minded managers, this move represents an open door to greater personal expression, a better fitting management style, and more relational decision-making while addressing the current post-modern generation, which tends toward soft leadership skills like friendship, interdependence and concern for the feelings of others (Ivancevich et al., 2011; Yukl, 2010). This movement among organizational leaders and scholars brings it closer to the firmly held convictions of the evangelical community who have historically attributed strong spiritual weight to decision making in their environments.

With greater contemporary focus on spiritually minded decision-making, greater demand for understanding non-cognitively initiated decision processes appears to be the next step. When one learns of leadership decisions being made because “it seemed right” or because “God said to,” one must ask not only if these claims have validity and utility, but also more deeply, if they should be accepted as inerrant, challenged or dismissed altogether.

### **Literature Review**

Since this research is geared toward the investigation of “discernment as a strategic leadership decision-making mechanism,” it seems appropriate to review higher-level understandings before examining detailed ones. Considering the term *strategic leadership* leads one to decision-making at the highest levels of an organization (Phipps, 2012). In their 2009 work, Narayanan and Zane confirm and expand earlier goals for strategic leadership as identified by Wilson (1996), specifically that: Strategic leadership means setting a direction others can and will follow that

builds a viable future for an organization; it means moving the organization from goal to goal by stimulating motivation in stakeholders; it means perceiving and communicating timeless vision to and through the culture of the organization where past, present and future blend; it means forethought and sensitivity toward the external environment allow for change and reactivity toward threats and opportunities; and, it means establishing the moral tone of the organization by leading, affirming and reaffirming so all stakeholders may see it plainly. In short, strategic leadership appears as the vortex for centripetal information flows within an organization where multiple streams of data flow inward, are analyzed and interpreted, and then its resultant themes, decisions, actions, ethics, motivators and energies are sent back throughout the organization. One may perceive strategic leadership to metaphorically represent a combination of the heart, intellect, life and ethos of the organization.

Strategic leaders bear the weight of decision-making, carrying the responsibility represented by all its aspects. As these leaders make decisions, they may utilize mechanisms represented by a multitude of decision-making theories, relying on: data-driven models, ethical models, risk models, experience models, sequentially sampled models and non-cognitive ones (Hedgebeth, 2007; Cottone and Claus, 2000; Nwogugu, 2005, Leary et al., 2009; Yechiam and Busemeyer, 2005; Teodorescu and Usher, 2013). It is the latter concept of non-cognitive decision-making—those decisions made through dependence upon feeling or sensing—that the remainder of this research addresses: most specifically the non-cognitive decision-making phenomenon identified as discernment, and to a lesser degree the effects of intuition within it.

### **Discernment and Intuition: The Basics**

A review of the concept of *discernment* in extant literature reveals that *discernment* is derived from *dis* meaning “apart” and *cernere* meaning “to shift” suggesting that the discernment

mechanism separates pieces of a decision (Trauffer et al., 2010b, p. 177). Some find the foundation of moral evaluation is present and add to this basis the process of decision-making by logic and reason with the character of “extraordinary instinct” (Moberly, 2006; Woiceshyn, 2011; Trauffer et al., 2010b, p. 177). Also, the sense of self-observation and self-regulation were woven throughout research descriptions (Trauffer et al., 2010b; Moberly, 2006; Trauffer et al., 2010). Considering a religio-historical facet, the ancient Hebrew context shows the word *discernment* as partially derived from the word *understanding* while Moberly (2006) describes *discernment* in his expansive religious work as testing and criticality from one’s conscience (Trauffer et al., 2010b).

A number of identified antecedents exist for *discernment*. Trauffer et al. (2010) identify courage, intuition and faith. Moberly (2006) adds that discernment may depend almost entirely on hindsight as its deciding criterion, since careful evaluation will establish a pattern of trust going forward. Various sources affirm discernment’s need for the pre-existence of convinced truth, a standard for comparison, ability to self-sacrifice, the availability of multiple choices, the conviction that such discernments are worth making and dependence upon acquired knowledge (Moberly, 2006; Trauffer et al., 2010b; Vasconcelos, 2009). A synthesis of these observations reveals a decisional system heavily dependent on dividing knowledge through comparing it to historical images within each person’s life and experience base: the leader disassembles and tests the individual parts of the current experience against known or perceived, selfless absolutes and ideals held deeply within his or her deepest inner person.

While similarities exist with *discernment*, one should not misconstrue it for intuition. Salas et al. (2009) explain *intuition* as comprised of: expertise; heuristics; implicit learning and memory; and individuality. While they decry intuition as synonymous with expertise, they do see intuition as synonymous with tacit knowledge (Salas et al., 2010, pp. 944, 947). Sosa (2006) sees intuition just

as viable as, and compares it to, perception, memory and introspection, but perceives that it only exists between abstract objects with no plausible way of measuring it (pp. 633, 664). Greenleaf and Spears (2002) embrace the position that intuition is comfortable with abstractions, but pose that those abstractions are patterns observed in previous experiences.

While evaluating expressed antecedents for *intuition*, very few were observable or identified. Intuition is believed by Trauffer et al. (2010b) to require the imagination, and Salas et al. (2010) require a cognitive decision-making apparatus to exist before intuition may function. Synthesis of this research leads one to perceive *intuition* as a reactive, subconscious, sympathetic system of sensing that relies on shadows, not full memories, of self-past where the most basic and barely definable learning experiences are the core components.

### **How Do They Function?**

The functionality of *intuition* is based on implicit learning where the leader is barely consciously aware (Salas et al., 2010). The Salas et al. (2010) extensive literature review, as well as earlier researched and recorded theories (e.g. Agor, 1986, 1989; Carlson and Kaiser, 1999), illustrate that intuition works like a librarian at a reference desk: a catalog of long-term storage exists and is accessed as needed by cognitive processes that when called upon, can produce feelings for use in the same decision-making process: intuition produces feelings. Consequently, this cognitive support system appears to function more fluidly in people with higher emotional intelligence (Downey et al., 2006). Intuition only requires minimal stimulus (Ambinder et al., 2009). Woiceshyn (2011) agrees with this functionality when she asserts the intuition's role is to bring principles forward such as productiveness, honesty, justice, integrity and pride as needed for application within cognitive decision-making processes, but notes the intuition is subordinate to the reasoning mind, and it cannot operate without receiving information and requests from it

(Woiceshyn, 2011). Thus the function of *intuition* appears to be a resource and retrieval system for personally held intangibles stored in the psyche that only operates when demands from the conscious mind are issued.

The process of *discernment* works by following the rule that lessons learned in easy circumstances apply to more difficult ones (Moberly, 2006). Discernment begins with the foundational supposition that a best-fit answer exists, that proper decision-making rules exist, that the most difficult response may still be the best executed one, and that no observed change in a normal processes is insignificant (Moberly, 2006; Trauffer et al., 2010b). It then wrestles with the question of when yes and no answers are concrete; defends itself by eschewing self-seeking and moral failure; and realizes that prolonged failure to make a decision is self-diminishing because time narrows differences between options due to changing circumstances (Moberly, 2006). Thus, the function of *discernment* appears to be the timely and selfless pursuit of an ultimate and possibly extrinsic route where the discernor considers and weighs even the most seemingly inconsequential observations.

### **Differences**

When considering the functional differences of discernment and intuition, one notices that although some sources include intuition as a sub-aspect of discernment, the converse is not observed. Also, while a small number of parallels do exist between discernment and intuition, a much larger number of differences are visible. One notable separation between *intuition* and *discernment* expressed in source literature is the strong identification of “subconscious processing” as the basis for intuition, while conscious knowledge streams of various types are strongly identified with *discernment* as it progresses (Woiceshyn, 2011, p. 311; Salas et al., 2010, p. 943; Greenleaf and Spears, 2002, p. 36). Woiceshyn staunchly extends this by asserting that intuitive decisions

happen *exclusively* outside the conscious mind and that the conscious mind rationalizes the intrinsic morality post hoc. Traüffer et al. (2010b) develop this comparison further as they note, against intuition, how discernment exposes its core concepts as: evaluation of information streams, formulating roadmaps, evaluating external influences, and sensitivity to culture. They further pose that discernment is a mechanism through which one may sift large amounts of knowledge, extracting only what is relevant to any given time, place, circumstance, and social structure; allowing one to make snap decisions.

Further differences revolve around one's development of discernment and intuition. The extant literature reveals that discernment may appear as shades of gray, giving the person greater ability to understand, but not necessarily clearly, and that clarity increases as information streams are assembled (Moberly, 2006; Traüffer et al., 2010). Intuition is said to be reliable in a sensing capacity, but does not develop by linking items together in a "causal way" like discernment does (Sosa, 2006, p. 64; Traüffer et al., 2010b). Intuition is also thought to develop and depend purely upon recorded experiences that may be retrieved more readily as one's age increases, and while discernment may develop greatly and differently from person to person, research notes intuition varies only minutely between individuals (Salas et al., 2010).

One final area of noted difference is the effect of culture on each one. Both Moberly (2006) and Traüffer et al. (2010) identify *discernment* as inherently related to culture because of how it is formed (Moberly, 2006; Traüffer et al., 2010). Throughout literature, it is possible to see the effects of culture innately interwoven into *discernment*. However, *intuition* is only once linked to culture in the research represented, and that in passing, leaving the sense that intuition is summarily universal to humanity instead of culturally dependent.

### **Spiritual Views of Discernment**

Remembering that discernment is culturally based, one should note that there are adherents who believe discernment is a definitively spiritual phenomenon. They perceive it is experienced through introspection, imagery and imagination (Zevit, 2005). Some include other spiritual aspects such as memory guidance, body awareness, and sensitivity to nature (Liebert, 2008). Yet others perceive that discernment is approached through spiritual means such as contemplative silence, prayer, pursuit of community belonging, and the abiding sense of unity (Frykholm, 2007).

Another facet of discernment for many spiritual adherents is the belief that it constitutes sensing God's voice; that it is a gift rather than something produced; and that discernment is part of the outflow of God's person and not mere intellectual ascent (Townes, 2010). Some go still beyond this and see a biblical aspect to discernment as one's being led by God in a certain direction, operating in humility yet with boldness to act however God directs (Ekblad, 2011). Those who subscribe to the biblical aspect of discernment as it applies to decision-making may refer to the use of the ancient Hebrew Urim and Thummim or the alternate idea of putting out a fleece as derived from the account of Gideon (Block, 2001; Bookman, 2001; Jones, 1992; Yancey, 1983).

While the phrase "I put out a fleece" is understood even outside of religious circles as looking for a sign to help make a decision, one may need to take special consideration of the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8; Deuteronomy 33:8; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65). These were two stones that were carried in the Israelite priestly clothing originally worn by Aaron, Israel's first High Priest, and used as an oracular device to consult God in whatever matter was presented to Him by the Jewish priest (Bookman, 2001; Houtman, 1990). The word Urim signifies 'light' and the word Thummim signifies 'integrity'. Although considered outdated by many biblical scholars, the work of Matthew Henry quite poetically illustrates the use of the Urim and Thummim

as explained in Exodus 28:30 when he pens, “And thou shalt give, or add, or deliver, to the breast-plate of judgment, the illuminations and perfections, and they shall be upon the heart of Aaron; that is, ‘He shall be endued with a power of knowing and making known the mind of God in all difficult doubtful cases, relating either to the civil or ecclesiastical state of the nation.’”

Others may refer to various New Testament scriptures referring to the Holy Spirit’s direction as perceived through phrases such as “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28, King James Version) or “they tried to...but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them...” (Acts 16:7) where these verses signify that a given path was being pursued, but that through some mechanism they perceived God intervening and bringing an understanding or illumination of an alternate decision or direction. Still others consider the Charismatic gift of the Word of Knowledge—a supernatural sense of God speaking to an individual—an experience of discernment (Ekblad, 2011).

### **What is Missing?**

After close observation of extant literature and research, it appears that a definitive understanding of discernment as a system and process is lacking. While the subject of discernment has been addressed in research from varied experiential vantage points, a conclusive analysis of discernment as a system of decision-making appears missing. Another area that is not identifiable in current literature is a list of factors that depreciate or debilitate the process of discernment. One’s discovery of these aspects may lay the groundwork for a definitive process of discernment and dispel some of the mysticism surrounding it. Further, defining aspects that diminish or destroy discernment and identifying corresponding actions for mitigating those factors becomes a plausible next step. If discernment can be practiced as an objective decision-making process for strategic leaders, it offers a point of unified connection for those who have the desire and ability to pursue it

and it opens the door for strategic leaders to access a spiritual level of decision-making that may prove to be very useful and very fulfilling to the leader and the spiritually sensitive organizations they lead.

### **Local Context**

To determine the spiritual aspects of discernment in strategic leadership, a sample base of discernment-believing and discernment-practicing adherents must be evaluated: the Foursquare denomination in Kansas fulfills this requirement. The Foursquare movement in Kansas began from the public humanitarian service of Aimee Semple McPherson in the early 1900s. The Foursquare movement is a church denomination with 20 locations in the state of Kansas. This denomination embraces the ideology that God's present-day plan for man has not changed since Jesus walked the earth and is evinced in their denominational motto taken from the biblical book of Hebrews that states, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8, King James Version). The Foursquare denomination maintains a high humanitarian global focus and the core belief that Jesus continues His work through present-day men and women. This conjoining of their evangelistic and entrepreneurial outward focus, blended with their belief that God speaks to and through men and women in their decisions, provides multiple spiritually-minded strategic decision opportunities and makes them a fit candidate for researching discernment since this non-cognitively initiated decision making experience is embraced as part of their culture, is expected to operate regularly and is expressed repetitively in their denominational and corporate writings (cf. [www.foursquare.org](http://www.foursquare.org)).

### **Personal Context**

I have self-identified biases in the area of discernment. I believe discernment is an external phenomenon that it is God given and not learned, but it is still reliant upon emotional

intelligence for its proper interpretation and execution. I also believe that most of those who will be involved in the study will not be able to authoritatively explain what discernment is, much less describe it ontologically. My experiences lead me to believe that some people use *discernment* an excuse to avoid difficult leadership decisions by placing the onus for bad or uncomfortable decisions on God. I believe others perceive it as a mechanism that is required for decision making which is a source of fear that paralyzes their decision-making because they feel that without it, they are incapable of leading or making any decision at all. I also hold that all participants in the study pursue discernment daily, if not weekly, because it is equated with the voice of God. Lastly, I believe discernment can be both processual and binary.

This research on discernment and how it applies to leadership and more specifically strategic leadership is important to me because of where I perceive our organizational environments today. With multitudes of Baby Boomers retiring over the next decade, there will likely be a glut of workplace openings accompanied by great transition. This suggests that younger men and women will be instituted into leadership positions because the base from which to pull will decrease in age. Not only does this dynamic establish a potential conflict between competing generational values, but it also establishes a potential field of distrust between incoming and outgoing leaders. Organizations will likely feel a polarization between a current 70-year-old outgoing leader and a 35-year-old incoming leader, as their worldviews may not, and likely will not, align. The senior outgoing leader may naturally disagree with the younger and vice versa on decisions that must be made for the welfare of the organization. This difficulty only expands when one projects this issue to multiple levels of any organizational hierarchy.

Given this dynamic, the need to have a shared focus between leaders and generations is apparent: a place where everyone may cast a common gaze for strategic decisions that must be

made. If leaders, young and old, incoming and outgoing, are able to better understand the functioning of discernment and if they are able to check their discernment process to be certain that no steps or stages are missing, they stand a greater unified chance of success. Further, if a process of discernment may be followed, whereby those who employ it have a common point of understanding, I believe it will help demystify the use of discernment, eliminate any power abuses, and level the field of hubris, ownership, and territorialism, enabling a truly group-centric decision-making environment where all participants may seek the same goal and potentially find the best fit solution together in a peaceful manner.

### **Problem Statement**

While respondents perceive discernment as a decision-making mechanism, no obvious structured process for discernment is evident. Further, no identified formal education regarding the process of discernment is offered to these respondents, and no tools for observing success or failure exist. The sense of discernment carries a mystical view that leaves every leader unto his- or herself and potentially enables power struggles or authoritarian leadership styles as people claim to hear God speak. These issues constitute the problem that this research seeks to address as it considers the potential of a definitive system of discernment and the diminishing factors that affect it.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research was to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study to determine the value of discernment within an environment that accepts it as a useful and trustworthy mechanism of strategic leadership decision-making. By examining the Foursquare movement in Kansas, one evaluated a century-old movement of people who believe in discernment, believe they practice discernment, and believe they know when discernment is missing. The ultimate goal was to produce a formal process definition, identify debilitating aspects, identify negative effects of

discernment, increase self-awareness about discernment and reach a determination regarding whether further scrutiny and refinement of discernment-related strategic leadership decisional processes was necessary. Further, some questions that were considered in this research are:

1. Do discernment adherents subscribe to and practice the phenomenon based on a definition?
2. How do adherents experience discernment? Can it be mapped?
3. How do strategic leaders use discernment in decision-making?
4. Do adherents of discernment distinguish it from intuition or is it the same?
5. How are strategic leadership discernment decisions judged as accurate?
6. Is discernment used in place of or in tandem with other decision-making mechanisms?
7. Does discernment in strategic leadership decisions equate only to “yes or no” answers?
8. What constitutes a successful discernment decision?
9. Are discernment-based strategic leadership decisions formulated differently in groups vs. individually, and if so is the change empowering, disabling or unobservable?
10. If a refinement process for discernment exists, how should this process look?

### **Research Method**

A qualitative study utilizing Clark Moustakas’ (1994) framework for transcendental phenomenology was chosen as the primary and best-fit mechanism, because it allows one to process diverse textures, structures, subjective truths and essences surrounding a phenomenon where the subjectivity of individuals is analyzed to produce objective universal qualities without which the phenomenon could not exist. Transcendental phenomenology “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Further, the process of transcendental phenomenology does not represent or portray the subjects of study as

objects, but seeks to include them as co-researchers in the process, inviting them to express depth, intrigue and interest as they are interviewed and included in the process, offering a quasi-team subjectivity and objectivity (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenological study has strong roots in empirical phenomenological research, heuristic phenomenological research as well as existential phenomenology, and brings with it a strong heritage, depending heavily on the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Kant and Descartes (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Because the process of discernment is individual and sensed, the selected study approach provided an ability to capture individual expression, emotion, conviction and defense of these attributes to effectively record, represent and depend upon these textures during and after the interview process: Transcendental Phenomenology naturally allows for this flexibility (Moustakas, 1994).

The process worked as follows. Eight leaders from within the Foursquare denomination in Kansas were invited to participate and all eight accepted. These co-researchers represent senior leadership ranging from one to 30 professional service years, were male and female, were from various education backgrounds, and were geographically located over 20,000 square miles of Kansas. All co-researchers were informed about the study concept, expectations, audio recording of the interview process, public information availability, effective anonymity, the fact that the information was to be used in a research project, potential publication and distribution of the study results, their waiver of ownership and remuneration, and of their ability to withdraw completely from the process at any time prior to study completion. Each participating co-researcher agreed to and signed a Participant Disclosure and Release form containing these terms, which included information for 24-hour access to the primary researcher. This was given to all participants no less than two weeks prior to the initial 50-120 minute interview.

Each co-researcher was interviewed and the interview was audio recorded. An interview script was prepared and employed to keep the interview on track. Each interview began by asking the co-researcher to tell a recent story of discernment (Seidman, 2006). Further, no definitions were offered to the co-researchers, allowing them to self-define all terms. Before, between and after the interviews, a personal journal of observations was maintained and updated. Observations about the co-researcher were recorded, notable items identified and introspections recorded. All co-researcher recordings were transcribed by a third party, as were the personal journal entries. The resultant set of interview and primary research data was 225 pages.

Next, the primary researcher read the transcription while listening to the audio recording, watching for and correcting any mistakes. During this first review experience and according to the audio files, notations were made regarding emotional observations of the co-researcher, any noteworthy pauses, deflective responses, anger responses, laughter and other notable expressions. This process allowed the primary researcher to utilize Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction of the interviews where one was able to derive, “a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience...” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

After this, the primary researcher read each transcription again without the audio file when all references to discernment were identified. Each time the co-researcher made an observation about discernment, the primary researcher noted this in the transcribed document. The note always began with the main keyword for cataloging. These keywords were designed ad hoc in the following fashion: If a keyword did not exist to represent the co-researchers phenomena, or if a keyword did not exist to represent the primary researcher’s observation, then a new keyword was created. If a keyword existed already, it was employed. This process was

repeated by the primary researcher, using all previously created keywords whenever possible, and only creating new ones as necessary. All repetitions of definitions, colloquialisms, emotions, etc. were identified so that numerical analysis might be done on statistically repeated terms and definitions. This corresponds with Moustakas' (1994) *Imaginative Variation* stage where the "aim is to grasp the structural essences...presenting a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it," and also with the *horizontalizing* stage where each statement is considered to have equal value with one another (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 35, 118).

After this stage, a copy of the transcript with the notations was delivered to each co-researcher and he or she was invited to read the document with the primary researcher's accompanying comments and to correct any misunderstandings or make any observations. This corresponds with Moustakas (1994) observations concerning data validation.

All primary researcher notations were finalized and the data was moved into a database where the 1,430 references were then categorized by primary keyword. A subsequent pass through the data enabled each primary keyword to be broken into sub-keys. It was at this point that the data was analyzed in themes and sub-themes. At the end of this phase, a written request for final clarification of three questions was distributed to each co-researcher and the primary researcher received the results of these three questions from all participants. Moustakas (1994) identifies these stages as defining "meaning units" where the data is "*clustered* into common categories or *themes* and meanings are used to develop the *textural descriptions of the experience*" (p. 118).

### **Reflection Mechanism**

Because transcendental phenomenological studies include the researcher's monolog and his or her interaction with other co-researchers, reflective tools are a requirement for a solid

investigation (Moustakas, 1994). During this analysis, three reflective tools were utilized.

**Personal Biases Statement.** Before the process of interviewing began, the primary researcher recorded as many identifiable biases as possible in regard to the subject of *discernment*, the population being interviewed, the parent organization referenced and any internal arguments for and against discernment. The externalization of these biases helped the primary researcher maintain awareness and watch for them as a pure state of *Epoche* was pursued (Moustakas, 1994).

**Co-researcher Review.** Each co-researcher was given a copy of the textures and stories captured during the interview process with the primary researcher, and each co-researcher was asked to read them. These marked transcriptions were given to each co-researcher to be reviewed for agreement and correction, following which any reflective addenda were submitted by the co-researcher in effort to provide the clearest understanding of the co-researcher's intentions, perceptions and thoughts.

**Primary Researcher Journal.** The primary researcher maintained a journal of personal thoughts and observations that occurred after the completion of the interview log and throughout the rest of the transcendental phenomenological study. These observations, thoughts, dreams, questions, photos, and images were used during subsequent interviews with the co-researchers and in tandem with all other findings for the Phenomenological Texture Analysis and the final synthesis.

### **Co-researcher Definition of Discernment**

Eight participants were chosen based on their position and length of service, ranging from one to 30 years of leadership experience in the Foursquare movement. No participants were given definitions or expectations and all interviews began with the same question: To describe a

time they used discernment in the past four to six weeks. A question guide was available to help steer the questioning if necessary, however in all eight cases, the questioning followed a natural progression that addressed all major questions consistently across all participants. All participants expressed illustrations surrounding strategic leadership and all were asked if their perception of discernment was different for strategic leadership when compared with the rest of their discernment experiences. All respondents declared that the individual discernment phenomenon they experience in their individual lives is identical to the discernment phenomenon used in strategic leadership decision-making efforts in their leadership positions.

Review of the interview transcripts yielded defining factors for discernment. Following is a composite representation of those components as reflected by the co-researchers. Discernment was defined by the interview participants first and foremost as a relationship with one or more members of the Christian Trinity, hereafter referred to as ‘God’, that is always in accordance with their perception of biblical truth. It is a phenomenon that may happen to a person without any forewarning, or it may be pursued through the individual or combined efforts of prayer, reading Scripture, solitude, quiet contemplation and fasting. Discernment is perceived as hearing God’s voice; learning God’s will; partnering in God’s plans; possessing God’s intentions toward a person or circumstance; knowing His boundaries; experiencing His correction; gaining His insight and global perspective; experiencing Him as present in circumstance; as an infusion of life or wisdom; and as the ultimate sense of peace. Ultimately, this definition of discernment springs from the perception that God knows what is best in any circumstance, and if a person is able to discover that knowledge and properly employ it, then the best possible outcomes will occur. Because discernment helps provide clarity to one’s vision; increases understanding; explains relationships between previously non-linking items; offers

correction; divides between good, evil, right and wrong; and even hints about the future, discernment is something that nearly all co-researchers find an invaluable resource for their decision making.

**Discernment Mechanics.** To the co-researchers, discernment stimuli occur in many forms. They appear as an alert, a leading, an unsettledness, a sense of wrong, a small voice, a spontaneous thought, a level or lack of peace, a direction for escape, an impression, a depth of feeling, a heaviness, a gut feeling, a yes/no answer, an either/or answer, an and/both answer, a go/stop/stand response and in other cases as a purely indescribable notion. It may come in gradual degrees and also in layers. It may be repetitive or obsessive, may or may not be cognitively definable, and may be positive or negative. It happens telescopically with infinite focal positions as a person starts at the widest point of a situation and gradually steps inward toward any given focal point, and it may even resolve as less than perfect, residing as best fit. Discernment is extremely contextual.

The discernment experience may be found any time a decision is to be made. It may be an immediate discerning or the discernment may be spread incrementally over a time span. It may even require analysis, action, and data gathering. While flaws may be made in the discernment process, one generally considers following discernment as obedience to God and avoiding discernment as disobedience to God. Because of this, one's depth of commitment to their relationship with God appears to heavily influence how much joy or anxiety is experienced at one's perceived success or failure in discernment. Further, through retrospective and post hoc analysis, one may learn from their experiences, patternize them for later use, store them in a compendium and use them to develop their sense of discernment going forward.

**Discernment Up, Out, In and Together.** While discernment maintains an upward view as a relationship with God for the co-researchers, it also interacts with an outward one. A person using discernment is a keen observer of object aspects such as another's body language, emotion, experience, gifting, and perceived intentions. A pursuit of discernment enables the discerning party to monitor others' leadership abilities, passions, personality traits, social functioning level, sense of trustworthiness and personal story. Discernment also demands understanding one's self to recognize abnormal internal responses, interpret internal conflict, recognize self-denial, consider one's own immaturity, and recognize personal biases.

Through this integrated mesh of emotional and relational intelligence, the discerning person invests in understanding his or her complete context based on self and participants': environment, circumstance, history, worldview, biases, emotional state, expectations, levels of authority and situational specifics. It's a skillful blend of information, observation, experience, phenomenon, involvement, trust, history, relationship, data, story, fact-finding, cognition, decision-making and humility.

### **Findings**

Following are the seven main observational findings as revealed by the co-researcher testimonies and subsequent analysis.

#### **Finding 1: Discernment Stages**

There are 13 identified stages of discernment as defined by the sample data. While these are cognitive stages, parallel and overlaying all these stages the co-researchers identified the spiritual aspects of prayer, Scripture reading, quiet reflection, solitude and fasting. The spiritual aspects happen in and through all stages and at the discretion of the discerner. Following are the 13 stages in order. Those cognitive stages that happen selectively are bracketed and may be

interpreted as ‘perceived optional.’ As described by the co-researchers, stages observed are:

1. The stimulus stage where the discernment process is triggered.
2. The self-searching stage where one evaluates internal issues to eliminate self-initiation.
3. The emotional stage where the stimulus incites responses [which may incite a return to stage two].
4. [The source identification stage where one attempts to decipher how the external phenomenological stimulus originated.]
5. The cognitive stage where one attempts to assimilate meaning.
6. [The data-gathering stage where observations and research are pursued.]
7. [The counsel-seeking stage where others are invited into the discernment experience for their observations. [Recursion may happen at this stage as discernment is used to gain discernment from others.].]
8. The conclusion stage where final meaning is assigned to the experience.
9. The decision stage where one decides how or whether to act on the conclusions.
10. [The action stage where a plan or decision is carried out.]
11. [The self-doubt stage as one strives to maintain clarity after action occurs.]
12. [A recursive stage, which may call this cycle from any of the preceding points to develop deeper clarity. And then, ]
13. [A backward looking stage where the process is observed through the lens of hindsight and deconstruction to form deeper clarity and add the finished memory to a personal compendium of experiences for use with future discernment events.]

An example of the 13 stages in narrative form may read like this: Anna needs to appoint a new Human Resources director and she believes that Ben is the person. Still, she feels uncomfortable appointing him to that position. She begins by asking herself if she has any bias or bad feelings toward Ben that would impede her decision. “No. I don’t believe I do,” she assures herself. She concludes it is not she who is producing this feeling; yet, she feels a sense of restlessness about moving forward. It makes her a little sad when thinking of appointing Ben, but why? “Is it something I heard about him? Did someone say something to me?” She concludes it isn’t any thing she’s aware of, but that she needs to look into it just to be certain. She prays and asks God for clarity and then reads a few chapters of her Bible, postponing her appointment until she senses the time is right. She looks at Ben’s employment history and sees a spectacular record. She mentions his name to co-workers to see how they respond when he’s mentioned; everyone says, “Oh! I love Ben!”

Finally, she talks to Julie, the Senior Vice-president of Operations, and expresses her situation, asking for her input about specifically appointing Ben to the position. After gaining the Senior VPs observations and considering them, she decides there is no earthly reason Ben shouldn’t be given the HR Director opportunity, but she still can’t make herself do it. She decides to wait and review Tina’s application: a different person she’s considering for the position. Interestingly, upon review of Tina’s application, she has no problems, no feelings of restlessness. She is completely at peace with the thought of her being the head of HR. Although she wants Ben, she offers Tina the position, knowing she will be able to do a great job. Still, even after appointing Tina to the position, she wonders if it was the right decision. Three weeks later, Ben comes to Anna and, with great sorrow and apology, gives his four-week notice. Ben loves the company and hates to leave, but explains that he must resign because his father is ill

and he must move across the country to take care of him. As Ben leaves her office, Anna reviews her leadership process, looking back over it and evaluating each decision she made. She opens her journal and writes down what happened and how happy she is that she followed discernment in her decision.

### **Finding 2: Relational Interest**

The aspect identified as *Relational Interest* is apparent in all co-researcher experiences of discernment. It has two parts. The first and main relationship in discernment is perceived as with God. The participants expressed deep desire to please God and deep regret when displeasing God. Pleasing was considered obedience to His discerned will and displeasing was considered disobedience to His discerned will and was likened to sin by some participants. All co-researchers identified their relationship with God as the driving force behind discernment experiences, and expressed the belief that discernment is one's ability to perceive God's voice to varying degrees. Participants, who spend regular time reading the biblical text and praying, express a greater ability to practice discernment because they feel more capable of perceiving God's voice. Some participants expressed that quiet contemplation and seclusion helped them discern with greater confidence. In all cases, prayer was identified as the means by which one initiates and pursues discernment with God. It is the perception of the co-researchers that either God initiates the conversation or one speaks to God and then listens for His reply. In both cases, one may perceive God's response in ways such as a voice, sense of peace, sense of impending danger, mental impression or verbal thoughts. This aspect of relationship, that God is approachable and engaged to communicate, is the primary basis for discernment. Without it, discernment does not exist. This relationship is subject to *relational complexifiers* that are discussed in the next paragraph.

The second aspect of *Relational Interest* that flows through discernment is between the subject of discernment (one who is seeking or experiencing it) and the object of discernment (the one about whom discernment is sought as it applies to others). This only happens when one person is seeking discernment about another and does not occur when discernment is sought regarding objects and non-relational decisions. Relational issues between the subject and the object are varied and diverse and may be experienced by the subject, the object or both. These relational factors complexify the experience of discernment and may deepen or diminish the experience, depending on the perceptions of one or both of the participants. Complexifiers may appear as authority, body language, emotion, experience, gifting, attitude, leadership abilities, passions, personality traits, social functioning level, trust, psychology, story and worldview. Each of these complexifiers affects how one not only relates in their relationship to God, but how one perceives and relates to others. Whether these complexifiers are positive or negative depends upon the context, need, intention and perception of either or both parties.

For example, Heather is the president of an organization and meets with Meagan who is the senior vice-president of finance. Meagan is concerned for her VP because of personality changes she sees in her. When Meagan is asked about her hours, she snaps back; when asked about certain fund balances, she becomes angry. Heather has known Meagan for 20 years: they began at the company the same month. Heather is confused as to whether she should confront Meagan because she values her friendship and doesn't want to convey distrust, yet her position demands she watch out for the company finances.

In that example, the relational complexifiers appear as emotion between both people, the experience of the VP, the gifting of the VP, Meagan's leadership abilities as president and the trust level they share. All of these exist between Heather (the subject) and Meagan (the object).

If Heather did not know or have a relationship with Meagan, the decision to confront her would likely not be as difficult, because these complexifiers would either be non-existent or diminished by lack of relational history and friendship.

An example for positive complexifiers may look like this. Heather is the president and her friend Meagan is the VP of Finance. Some members of the Board of Directors like Meagan considerably. They tell Heather she should consider Meagan for the Senior VP of Operations position in the company. Heather and Meagan have been friends for 20 years and Heather would love nothing more than to have Meagan in that position. Heather excitedly offers Meagan the position and Meagan greets it with indifference, because she is uncertain and uncomfortable. Heather responds by encouraging her and telling her what a great opportunity it would be and how they will be able to work together even more than they currently do.

In that example, the relational complexifiers are the same: emotion, experience, gifting, leadership abilities and trust. All of these are shared between the Heather (the subject) and Meagan (the object). If Heather did not know or have a relationship with Meagan, the decision would not likely be as easy, because these complexifiers would either be non-existent or greatly diminished by lack of relational history and friendship. Further, in this example, it is possible that Heather is allowing these complexifiers to inhibit her ability to see bad circumstance that may lie ahead for Meagan were she to take the promotion.

### **Finding 3: Self-Awareness**

Beyond one's relationships with God and others, one's relationship with self is the next influencer of discernment. No respondent specifically stated they needed to understand themselves as part of their discernment process, and evaluating co-researcher testimonies shows

an extremely small number of co-researcher responses referencing the development of personal self-awareness to deepen one's discernment capabilities.

However, when identifying items that diminish the degree of discernment, every respondent identified personal factors, which accounted for 68% of the total co-researcher responses describing discernment aspects. Restated, of all the terms that were used to define discernment, 68% of them were identified as diminishing factors (Appendix B). Some of the self-awareness factors identified were anger toward self or others, anger toward God, anxiety, fear, bitterness, unforgiveness, unspiritual thinking, confusion, context, distracted thoughts, criticality, emotionalism, frustration, burnout, tiredness, fatigue, false humility, health issues, immaturity, memories, friendship, passion, presumption, personality, pride, blame projection, rage, rejection, resentment, justification, selfish ambition, supposition, tragedy and zeal. One's failure to identify these factors and/or mitigate them is identified as a diminishing influence on one's discernment experience that may range from slight diminishment to fully disabling it.

#### **Finding 4: Backward Looking**

The *Backward Looking* stage of discernment appears to produce what I identify as *long-term value* and *residual value*. *Long-term value* occurs when the discerner finalizes the discernment experience, categorizes the experience and then files the experience for future use. *Residual value* happens when the discerner uses the discernment experience to self-assess other areas or spawn a dependent cycle of discernment or self-change.

The *backward looking* stage appears to be an important "control" stage of the discernment process where one's flawed views and decisions are identified against one's perceived final outcomes from the discernment process. In this stage, one discovers that discernment may be *procedural*, *processual* or *progressive*. *Procedural* signifies that the

discernment experience is bound by existing procedures of decision-making, such as those found in Scripture where Jesus demands one give to whomever should ask or where an organizational policy states that all requests for food be granted if under a certain amount. This procedural sense of discernment comes from a decision-making model where the procedure was defined in initial discernment and is simply followed. This type of discernment appears to be followed and then dismissed.

*Processual discernment* signifies that antecedence plays a part, in that prior discernment decisions paved the way for the current one as influencers, but not necessarily as dependencies. It conveys, “Because certain previous experiences have occurred, the current experience is now possible.” It also signifies that the discernment experience may be an individual aspect to a much larger discernment understanding; interlinking seemingly scattered parts to a larger whole where a system of progression is not necessarily obvious and where no defined endpoint may exist. This type of discernment experience appears to be filed away in the discerner’s compendium without immediately expected use.

*Progressive discernment* signifies that precedent is at work and where a history seems visible and perhaps a future seems possible. Here, one may observe links from the current discernment experience to the previous discernment experience much like the rungs of a ladder, and where the current discernment experience strategically builds upon the previous one and sets the stage for the next one if needed. Here, the discerning leader appears to store the discernment experience and immediately begins looking for the next linked discernment experience.

At the conclusion of a discernment experience, when circumstances didn’t resolve in the expected way, the sample data revealed that the discerner evaluated the outcome in one of the following ways: whether it was a poorly discerned from the beginning, whether one went beyond

the accurate discernment in one's actions, whether one went faster than discernment and the timing was flawed, whether one went slower than the discernment and lost the opportunity, whether the discernment was finished and one now needs a new discernment to continue, or whether one had convinced one's self to perceive the discernment out of selfish ambition or self-will. Just as solving certain mazes is perceived easiest when starting at the finish point and working backward to the beginning point; evaluating discernment from finality, back through the 13 stages, and ending up at the initiating discernment stimulus appears the only way some discernment experiences make sense. This process appears to be required for the upkeep of the internal discernment compendium, and without it future discernment experiences appear severely diminished.

**Finding 5: Anxiety Aversion or Peace Pursuit? Mitigating Circumstance**

The ballast of the discernment experience as described by the co-researchers appears in two forms. The first is *anxiety aversion* which is observed as one: runs from the feelings of failure caused by perceived disobedience to the will of God; pursues release from an unidentified feeling of unrest; finds a way to avert a sense of impending disaster; satisfies a repetitive or plaguing thought; responds to a sense of inexplicable urgency that fosters a sense of concern and fear; perceives the existence of an unseen yet greater truth that if found will change a circumstance; and experiences defeat of or protection from a perceived spiritual force.

The second form is *peace pursuit* as one experiences that obedience to the perceived will of God is fulfilling and that honor exists when following discernment because following discernment equates to partnering with God.

Noteworthy is the observation that the co-researcher data poses that the depth of sorrow experienced by failed discernment is significantly deeper than the joy that comes from successful

discernment, which suggests actions are more often motivated by anxiety aversion. It is also noteworthy that the respondents reflect a subjective definition of peace, both by their own definition and by their examples, that is different than a sense of simple emotional peace. The peace reflected through discernment may exist even in difficult and tumultuous emotional times. This is not a pursuit of merely emotional stability, but a deep abiding internal and spiritual aspect that is irrespective of circumstance, knowledge and anticipation. While the deep sense described may bring about the emotional peace that is also referenced by the participants, emotional peace was never identified as bringing the peace described through acting on successful discernment experiences, leading one to believe they are unique sensations achieved only through obedience to the perceived action requirements of the discernment process. This observation about peace leads one to consider the possibility that the depth of sorrow experienced by one's failure to act on discernment is a different type of sorrow as well, which may more fully explain one's committed aversion attempts. This finding is key to understanding discernment.

The third aspect of this observation is that one's decision to avert anxiety or pursue peace seems based on the initial discernment stimulus as interpreted by the individual discerner. The one common factor between both approaches, that of anxiety aversion or peace pursuit, is the mitigation of circumstance. In both cases, the circumstance is the same and it is the initial observation and potentially the approach that may change.

### **Finding 6: Group Dynamics and Modifications**

The term often used by co-researchers to identify discernment experienced inside group settings was "unique." However, analysis of the interview data supports the perception that the difference is in the dynamic and not in the process. The group discernment process appears to be each person bringing their individual discernment experience back to the group, and the group

discernment experience is the amalgam of all the parts. Analysis of references to specific group aspects reveals that half of the items deal with personal and group development; the other half of the responses are divided between eleven different categories. Note that this data does not report the need for personal and group development, but the occurrence of personal and group development as one walks into and through group discernment experiences. In other words, discernment is a conduit through which people experience personal and group development. Successful group discernment experiences are identified by how well the group maintains unity and how well agreed upon outcomes are achieved more than a dynamic between who is right or wrong. While it may be impossible to provide a unanimous decisional satisfaction among all participants, success is recognized by the fact that the group members are still committed to one another at process completion. Thus, the respondents unanimously reported that properly executed group discernment experiences are believed to increase group cohesion.

Group discernment requires all the parts of individual discernment and adds to it a greater amount of structure, specifically in pre-determined rules of engagement. It also requires more time and energy than individual discernment. Further, group discernment is subject to authority issues because a strong personality, whether a legitimate authority figure or an informal authority/leader, can dramatically affect the process and outcomes of group discernment. If a person who is presumed or understood to have authority within the organization is part of the group discernment effort, people may acquiesce to that person rather than submitting open and honest contributions of personal discernment to the process. A person of presumed or understood authority may use this perception to his or her benefit, if he or she senses the favor of the group. This equates to authority figures often being the pivotal factor for the success or failure of group discernment experiences.

Analysis of co-researcher responses reveals perceptions of *leadership* and *membership* positions as they interact within group discernment experiences. The co-researchers conveyed that those holding leadership positions, who would be most effective in group discernment, would take responsibility to keep their own agenda in check, maintain open communication with the group, be open to challenge, encourage the process over the selection of right and wrong, draw-out introverts and curtail extroverts.

Co-researchers also identified that members who benefit the discernment process most address not only their own internal challenges, but also address how those challenges interact with others who have *their* own personal challenges. They note that effective members will be well-intended, candid, listening, mature, respectful, safe, transparent and trustful. They further identify that the effective member will be keenly aware of his or her decision-making predisposition, be willing to self-assess before questioning the motives of others, and have an understanding of how personalities interact in group experiences. Without these individual member aspects, the outcomes of group discernment were identified as diminished.

### **Finding 7: Timing**

Discernment actions are time sensitive. Note that timing here is not the sense of cyclical timing to keep a system orderly or sequenced, but the use of proper entrance and exit points of a linearity. The discerning leader realizes that circumstances form opportunity and opportunity may only exist during windows of favorable timing. Discernment decisions and actions are not commodities that may be purchased and sold at the discerner's discretion; they are similar to time service offerings. William Stevenson explains timing like this: "Unlike goods, services [discernment responses] cannot be produced in one period and stored for use in a later period. Thus, an unsold seat on an airplane, train or bus cannot be stored for use on a later trip"

(Stevenson, 2009). Stevenson's example in business directly illustrates the discernment action-timing window. Remember, discernment appears to have a potency coefficient related to total time until action, since prolonged failure to make a decision is recognized to diminish discernment, narrowing differences between options (Moberly, 2006, p. 251). Experience seems to be the item that teaches what is too fast and what is too slow of a response time.

To restate the main points of this discernment model as reflected by the sample population, discernment: is defined as a sense that is available any time a decision may be made; may be identified as a 13 step process; is highly relational toward God and humanity; is highly contextual and based on the total number of contexts represented; depends on the individual's investment in the process; may be affected by complexifiers that can either cause it to become more difficult or easier to perform; may be procedural, processual or progressive in nature; is very self-aware; requires backward looking in preparation for future discernment experiences; may be used in anxiety aversion; operates similarly in groups, but with additional facets; and, is highly time dependent.

### **Analytical Reflections**

Discernment's effect on leadership appears profound for those who seek it. It is interwoven within one's self, in one's relationships, through one's worldview, in one's definition of authority, and as supporters of discernment are convinced it is God's perfect will to be performed on earth. To the discerning leader, a solid grasp of discernment appears the surest way to successful leadership decision-making experiences, because he or she would surmise that if one is capable of thinking and seeing like God, one might also decide and lead like God.

One may question how any human could be relational with an invisible and purely perceived personality such as God. This question carries merit and should be evaluated. It

appears this concept parallels long-distance relationship dynamics where two parties never see each other face-to-face. In essence, the discerner is building his or her primary relationship as a long-distance one, with a person who the discerner neither physically sees nor physically hears and who responds primarily through perceived phenomenological impression and one's reflection on His perceived writings. This concept parallels a long-distance relationship, perhaps between countries or across a continent, where one experiences another through the use of photographs and written correspondence. Laura Stafford (2005) notes from her research, that opponents may discredit long-distance relationships because they are perceived inferior or distressed, which she identifies as an incorrect judgment. Long-distance relationships are characterized by commitment and can be satisfying like geographically close ones (Pistole et al., 2010). Formal mentorship and coaching services support distance relationships, as do forms of counseling and therapy, such as Freud's work with 'Little Hans' (Homitz and Berge, 2008; Skinner and Zack, 2004). Distance relationships that rely on written communication aren't without emotion or expression; they merely take on different aspects and take longer to form (Alleman, 2002).

Responses from co-researchers placed great depth upon learning God's discoverable personality, His likes and dislikes, as well as those things that the co-researcher perceived as pleasing or saddening Him. This appears to primarily happen through the reading and study of the biblical texts and accrued history through completed and evaluated discernment experiences.

All co-researchers were comfortable in their discernment relationships, and while many discussed feelings of sadness or anxiety at failing to follow their discernment decisions, none of them expressed that he or she had quit trying to discern or that discernment ceased due to their failure, suggesting their perceived relationship with God is one more heavily dependent upon

commitment and process instead of outcomes.

At this point, one should revisit intuition and note some final observable difference between discernment and intuition as represented by this sample that would not have made sense earlier in this document. While these respondents highlight that discernment and intuition each use a process of thinking, maintain long-term memory, depend on an experience base, support pattern recognition and aid potential decision-making, they differentiate in core ways. Discernment is first and foremost relationally focused toward God and then humanity; Intuition is not based on relationships. Discernment is an effort to gain and define external knowledge in purposeful, systematic ways: Intuition is not based on purposeful intent. Discernment is not processed automatically and requires conscious effort: Intuition is not consciously processed. Discernment is fed by impressions and sensations: Intuition produces impressions and sensations (Salas et al., 2010). By these variants alone, one observes the core differences are enough to demand separate definitions. This should not convey, however, that supporters of discernment do not rely on intuition. Both discernment and intuition were observed in participant accounts.

### **Strategic Implications**

Before entering the strategic use of this research, the core aspect of discernment must be revisited. Discernment is a byproduct of pursuing what the discerner perceives as a healthy relationship with God, getting to know Him and then learning how He communicates. It is different from intuition. The discerning party's second obligation is to relationship with others. In the presence of unhealthy relationships, the discernment experience is diminished. Defining and deepening factors of prayer, Scripture reading, solitude, quiet contemplation and fasting increase one's discernment experience. Diminishing factors that primarily focus on interpersonal relationship issues also exist. Co-researchers identified that as a discerner pursues a primary

relationship with God and continues to develop it, God's voice becomes more easily perceived and the false and diminishing factors are also more easily identified. The defining part of discernment is relationship.

Discernment is not merely a cognitive exercise or framework to memorize. While sample data suggests that cognitive exercise and a framework of discernment will help one make certain the greatest level of objectivity is being pursued, the ultimate goal of discernment appears to be that of perceiving God's injection for a specific circumstance, to eliminate the cognitive dissonance, to formulate a plan of action in accordance with His view of the circumstance, and then to carry it out to completion, all under the perception of ultimate decision-making capability.

### **Theoretical Implications**

There are a number of theoretical implications that are illuminated by an in depth study of the discernment experience in the leadership context. To begin, it appears that the development of discernment is dependent upon two primary factors. The first is mankind's willingness to enter and develop a relationship with God. It appears that the deeper and more honestly one pursues a relationship with God, the greater the possibility a person will experience successful discernment. Next is the discerners' dedication to understand complexifying factors and to remove those that are diminishing ones. In theory, the more that complexifying factors are understood and the more mechanisms are found to mitigate diminishing factors, the cognitive dissonance one experiences should continue to decrease, allowing for a clearer personal perception of fulfilling discernment.

Other theoretical implications became evident through the course of this study, most of them as questions requiring action or further research. Here are a number of them:

**God's Sovereignty.** Since God is sovereign and may choose not to speak, how does one respond to a discernment experience if God chooses not to interject? How does one know whether it is God's decision to withhold His word or the individual discernor whose discernment is diminished or disabled?

**Inhibiting and Diminishing Factors.** Is there a difference between inhibiting and diminishing factors of discernment? While many diminishing factors were discovered for the discernment process, a number of them seemed to inhibit discernment altogether. This poses the questions of whether or not there is a difference? Does an inhibiting factor function differently than a diminishing one? Are the collateral damages different between the two? Are long-term issues different for one versus the other?

**Missing Discernment.** If one expects to operate in discernment all the time, how will one know when it is missing? How may one check for its presence? Does discernment always have a defined appearance or can it exist as an underlying current without definable phenomenon?

**Diminishing Returns.** As one adds greater depth of skill in emotional intelligence, social intelligence, self-assessment and other supportive areas, is there a point of diminishing return where once the discernor pursues these types of development activities, the discernor becomes less able to discern? Can a discernor reach a point where self-dependence becomes inevitable? If so, how does one discover and avoid that point?

**Contextualization.** Is God's will for any given circumstance absolute? Or is it always contextual? Is it possible for all participants in group-discernment to disagree and for them all to still be discerning God's will when considering strategic leadership issues? If a leader wants to pursue a given direction, and perceives God speaking specific direction to accomplish specific strategic goals, and a group member disagrees with the leader and cannot follow him, potentially

both may be discerning and following God's voice of direction for their individual realm of authority and/or influence; both may be properly discerning even where the end is not agreeable. If so, does that mean God has a separate will for an entire organizational entity just as He may each individual participant in the discerning experience?

**Requisite Effort.** It appears that discernment related to negative circumstances produces more effort than positive discernment experiences. Why is this and should this be the case? Should there be a level of requisite effort irrespective of the discernment experience?

**Self-Honesty.** In the face of possible self-deception where one chooses to believe that discernment is happening properly because one doesn't want to believe he or she is in error, how does one stay honest about the discernment process? Is there a group or personal loss for admitting instability? Is this long-term or short-term? How does this appear to an organization of 'faith' where a leader chooses to believe he or she is right irrespective of what is seen or experienced?

All of these theoretical implications highlight that the study of discernment requires more specific inquiry, and that although it intertwines with a large number of other theoretical models, it is my observation that enough evidence toward uniqueness may exist to justify researching *Discernment Theory* as its own decision-making model.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this research are numerous and conclude a strong possibility to develop the sense of discernment. As such, there are a number of actions derived from the research that one may engage.

**Spiritual Disciplines.** The most primary and developmental aspect of discernment is developing one's relationship with God; working to develop a long-distance relationship with

Him where one learns His personality and tone. One observes this in a life that embraces the disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, solitude, quiet contemplation and fasting. When entering a discernment experience, one should self-assess to see if a steady habit of these relational pursuits is in place. If they are not, the discernor must understand that he or she is starting from a diminished discernment point of view.

**Relationship Building.** While spiritual disciplines build one's relationship with God, relationship building with one's close friends, confidants and counsel-seeking team is also visible in the data. Working toward greater depth of honesty and transparency is key to deeper shared discernment experiences. The discernment experience may only be shared between parties to the level that both feel comfortable expressing their deepest senses. To that end, shallow relationships produce shallow counsel and lead to a diminished discernment point of view.

**Identify Relational Complexifiers.** In each relationship, one experiences relational complexifiers. These are attributes that make open communication more difficult. One relationship may be resistant to any sense of advice sharing. Another may be reticent to expose their discernment thoughts because they have low self-esteem. Yet another may feel required to solve the problem completely. These are all aspects that are unique to every individual who may be part of the discernment experience, and without knowing these aspects as they relate to each person, one's plans to mitigate the complexifying factors may never be formulated. The discernor must become a student of those in his or her life who are trusted and invited into discernment experiences.

**Familiarity with Discernment Stages.** One should become familiar with the 13 stages of discernment so one may observe stages are not being skipped. While not every stage is

required, one should know why a stage is being omitted if indeed it is. The stages themselves do not supply discernment, but they help establish that one's best effort is being expressed in the discernment process.

**Increase Self-Awareness.** When respondents identified why discernment failed, it was because of diminishing personal factors. While well over half of all responses showed that the discerner identified self-factors for why the discernment experience failed, only a very few of the responses expressed needing to know one's self better to increase discernment success. This reveals a need for each discerning person to invest time in honestly evaluating him- or herself. Discernment requires getting past a self-check stage (stage two). If the discerner does not know *his or her own* diminishing factors, he or she will severely limit the remaining value of the discernment experience. One may consider doing the following to help increase self-awareness: (a) write as much of a personal history as one may remember, identifying memories and relationships that were noteworthy, both for positive and negative affect, because these may supply bias in discernment experiences; (b) ask close relationships to identify ones areas of self-seeking and one's inability to receive constructive feedback; (c) read books on emotional intelligence and relational intelligence to expand one's worldview in these areas; (d) pursue a coaching relationship that allows honest feedback into one's life; (e) begin journaling; (f) know one's own worldview by writing it down and evaluating it—why one carries certain beliefs and their basis? By doing all these, one may help set the stage for increased self-awareness, identifying areas that may need supported or areas that may need controlled during a discernment experience.

A non-exhaustive list of self-assessment questions is provided in Appendix A, and is only offered as a list of suggestions to motivate thought. These are questions that were derived from

the findings of the co-researcher sample base and only represent the observations from this group. One may use this list or a similarly created one to check for diminishing factors to discernment. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, only the opportunity to better understand one's self. Honest effort in answering these questions may be of great benefit.

**Humility.** One should work on deepening humility as an attribute to one's life. Humility toward God and others was one of the identified ways that discernment was restored or strengthened either internally or in regards to another person.

**Add Lenses.** One might consider becoming familiar with Chaos Theory, Systems Theory, Bowen's Family Systems Theory, Contingency Theory, Sense Making theories, Terror Management Theory, risk aversion, taste aversion, personality types, power types, conflict management styles and leadership styles. All of these theories and understandings were observed in co-researcher interview data. These may offer the learner new lenses to enable him or her to associate and assimilate facts from various sources in much quicker and diverse ways. Every lens one adopts offers the opportunity to see the world in a new way and opens the potential for different and better decisions and discernment observations.

**Determined Backward Looking.** One of the greatest failures among all participants was the failure to evaluate the discernment experience at its conclusion. Without proper investment in the backward looking stage, the discernment experience is not patternized and added to the compendium. Post hoc analysis of a discernment experience, where one starts at the end and works one's way backward through the experience helps one evaluate the process and find potential areas of fault or mistake. This should happen in groups as well, but with a slight twist. The group participants should do their own backward looking experience prior to meeting in a group setting to perform the same task. This will help each individual steer clear of

groupthink, as memories are being formulated and recalled; it may also help reduce hindsight bias. The group should come together after all participants have completed their personal patternization and process the discernment experience together. Without this backward looking stage, discerners diminish their ability to identify future discernments. It is here that one may want to keep a chronicle of discernment experiences, because historical review appears to refresh and reinforce the imprint of experience.

**Procedural, Processual or Progressive.** If possible, in the midst or at the end of a discernment experience, one's taking time to evaluate whether the discernment experience is procedural, processual or progressive may be beneficial. Knowing the type of discernment experience one is undergoing helps keep one's focus where it should be. Treating a processual discernment as a progressive one will frustrate the discerner since a conclusion will be expected but may never arrive.

**Discernment Mentorship.** One apparent outcome of discernment is that the more difficult the circumstance, as the discerner maintains invests in more difficult discernment experiences, their discernment skills grow in response. This suggests that a person will never grow in discernment beyond their most difficult invested discernment experience. To this end, leadership should consider including followers in their discernment processes in the counsel seeking stage. By doing this, the leader will introduce the follower to the problem, include them in the discernment process in a way that does not require their discernment be used, and will open the door to deeper discernment development in a way that is safe for the leader and the follower. The leader should include the follower in the backward looking stage as well so that the follower can experience the final stage of the discernment process and add a version of it to his or her compendium.

**Group Issues.** When dealing with group discernment experiences, one should be certain to establish ground rules at the beginning of the experience such as: How decisions will be made? Is unanimity required? Is there a formal authority structure? How will the final response be reported? Then proceed to the interpersonal level asking questions such as: Who in the group feels referent power toward another member? Who feels that members hold expert power? Who feels that they are not as spiritual as others? Who feels they may not have anything to offer? Are there any inter-personal issues among members of the group that need addressed? Is there unforgiveness toward another member of the group? These are all examples of questions that should be addressed before beginning a discernment experience so that as many complexifying or diminishing factors may be identified and mitigated before the process begins. Remember that within group discernment, everyone gets to play and the group members should help each other express their true sense of discernment in an environment of safety, trust, truth and openness.

**Planned Group Discernment.** Leadership should plan discernment experiences surrounding the pursuit of simple situations so that the dynamics of group discernment are engineered and experienced before they are required. This will give a leader the opportunity to observe him- or herself, observe the dynamics of the group, and to begin the identification process for diminishing factors among members and within the group as a whole. Here too, the group should experience initial rules of engagement, the discernment experience, the opportunity for everyone to participate, the ability to address debilitating attitudes and actions during the experience, the personal patternization stage and the group patternization event. In all of these, the focus on group honesty, openness, humility and transparency should be paramount and any power types not agreed upon by the group should be identified and addressed openly. These

planned group discernment experiences offer a group the opportunity to seek God together, pray together, pursue truth together, interact together, decide together, backward look together and build a sense of group discernment that will likely be valuable in later more difficult experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Within this research, one observes the capture and delineation the discernment process and its surrounding system assets, which may ultimately become a structured resource and common reference for strategic leaders and top management teams as they attempt to use discernment as a decision-making mechanism. In this document, one has become familiar with seven key findings from this discernment research, which are identified and explained as: the 13 stages of discernment that were consistently followed by all co-researchers in this sample base; a delineation of how relational interest is absolutely necessary for useful discernment experiences; a careful discussion of how self-awareness must be pursued for discernment success; a detailed account expressing need for backward-looking to build one's discernment compendium for future discernment experiences; a careful discussion of how to evaluate one's disposition toward anxiety aversion or peace pursuit in the process of discernment; a definitive list of the various group dynamics and necessary modifications to experience successful group discernment; and a careful call to attention for the needed sensitivity of timing in discernment experiences.

The outcomes of this research illustrate that those leaders and groups who believe in discernment, who effectively follow discernment to and through action planning and execution, and who adhere to their discerned convictions, are very satisfied with their leadership and decision results. It is also apparent from this research that stronger group cohesion can be an outcome of discernment, accompanied by a very high number of group members accepting and supporting the final decision within group discernment experiences. This study has illuminated

that whether the person has one year or 30 years of leadership experience, the discernment process of decision-making is identical for all age groups, genders, and levels of leadership. It has also revealed that those who pursue discernment may continuously grow in discernment skills and in their ability to use them. With such potential for increased unity in strategy combined with the improved vision and coherence that shared discernment experiences bring, those who perceive discernment as a valid decision-making tool, and who utilize it skillfully, stand to benefit greatly from its use and perhaps even experience the sense of leading their organizations as God would.

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## Appendix A

### Self-Assessment Questions

Following are only a sample of potential questions one may respond to in an effort of self-assessing in preparation for discernment experiences. The complete list may be downloaded from <http://www.bigmeaning.com/discernment/selfassessment.pdf>.

Question	If Yes, explain.
How will you feel if you don't follow this discernment decision?	
Have you experienced abnormal thought patterns?	
Do you believe that following discernment could make a difference in the outcome?	
What is your source of conviction in this discernment experience? (Guilt, Responsibility, God, etc.)	
Have you prayed?	
Have you spent time in quiet reflection?	
Have you spent time in solitude?	
Have you spent time searching the Scripture?	
Have you fasted?	
Are you angry toward God?	
Do you see yourself as the victim?	
How would you describe the sense you are trying to discern?	
Do you feel mature enough to handle this circumstance?	
When you compare it to past discernment experiences, does it remind you of any?	
If you are reminded of past experiences, what are the similarities?	
If you are reminded of past experiences, are there common people involved?	
Does your discernment involve a person or people? (this could be just yourself)	
Do you sense any emotional baggage toward the person or people of your discernment experience?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel unforgiveness?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel bitterness?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel anger?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel pride?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel confusion?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel resentment?	
When you consider the people involved, do you feel rejection?	

## Appendix B

### Complete List of Diminishing Factors

Following is a complete list of diminishing factors for discernment as extracted from participant interviews. The category represents the primary category of diminishment. The Sub Category column represents an extended layer of interpreted category. The Note From Research column represents the interview note made while analyzing the transcribed testimony. This list of observations is a minute subset of the full 1,460 observations for the study as a whole. The full list may be downloaded from <http://www.bigmeaning.com/discernment/diminishingfactors.pdf>.

<b>Diminishing Factors</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Sub Category</b>	<b>Note From Research</b>
Authority	Over object (no need for it)	Perceived authority of the object can diminish discernment of the subject
Backward Looking	Bad will happen again	Bad past experiences can diminish discernment
Backward Looking	Good will happen again	Good experiences could diminish discernment because it could cause them to rubber stamp new discernment experiences with little effort
Backward Looking	History between parties	History between parties may diminish discernment
Backward Looking	Previous experiences	Previous experiences may diminish discernment
Backward Looking	Relying on past discernment	Remembering past discernment experiences hinders one's current discernment if all situations are expected to repeat the same way
Counsel Seeking	Flawed counsel	Seeking council from others with bent motives toward the discerned object is diminishing to discernment
Counsel Seeking	Perceived danger or threat	Perceived risk of speaking with council may be a diminishment to discernment
Criteria	Explicit requirements like lists	Physical needs such as food take no discernment
Criteria	Preset Criteria	Pre-set criteria may diminish discernment by limiting view from out of the ordinary circumstances
Definition	Flawed definition of success	Not knowing what success is before going into discernment makes it difficult to address failure at the end