

Discernment at Work at Work

I don't remember when I first heard the word "discern" used in conjunction with making or taking work assignments but I do remember my feelings and thoughts. In essence they were, "What a sneaky way to get me to do work I don't really want to do." It has taken me awhile to recognize discernment as a way for me to get honest with myself, to recognize that it is much more complex than just moving someone to take on a particular task voluntarily.

Discernment, as I have come to understand, is about wisdom, humility, motivation, and judgment. It is about wisdom in that it depends on personal knowledge of our inner qualities and an understanding of the relationships between those qualities and the needs of the various levels of community in which we live. It is about humility in that it requires us to be honest about our capabilities and our motives. It is about motivation in that we are called to act out of love and care for our communities—family, neighborhood, parish, civic, and work. It is about judgment in that it calls for us to make decisions based on this knowledge and these understanding, decisions that bring about good for all who are touched by the decision.

It is impossible to discern the possibilities, let alone the best action, without knowing ourselves, particularly our goals, that which we desire. These are paradigms or screens that will filter all that we sense and shape our perceptions to fit our hopes and expectations. Knowing ourselves well enables us see and be open to what we might not expect.

My initial reaction to discernment came from a prideful belief that I could do any of the tasks before us and do them better than just about anyone else. I had to learn the limits of my capabilities and the wonderful range of capabilities of my companions. Humility, that is, recognition and truthful understanding of the limits of my gifts, had to be learned before I could engage in anything resembling a faith centered discernment process. All the talents in the group were gifts from God and needed respectful acknowledgement in discerning our paths and actions.

Faith based discernment is also about motivation, about why I act or don't act. The personal transformation called for here is to move, as one writer put it, from "desire fueled by selfishness to desire fueled by concern for others." We may know ourselves, our deep desires; and yet, we choose to exercise our free wills to act for others rather than self.

Judgment in discernment is not only about the final decision but also about each of the elements that go into a truly faithful, loving discernment. Do I know myself, my goals, and my desires in this situation well enough to be open to alternatives? Do I have the time to do the task? Do I have a truthful knowledge of my capabilities and those of my companions? Where are my strengths and my weaknesses? How can both my strengths and my weaknesses contribute to the resolution of the work we are about? What is the loving thing to do for each of the relationships I am a part of? What decision of mine will bring about the best situation for all involved?

Discernment may be about saying, "No," as much as about taking on a new task. In the end it is about transforming me from self-centered to other centered, humbly and with love.

DISCERNMENT — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of discernment in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of discernment in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of discernment in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based discernment in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?