

HOW ORGANIZATIONS LISTEN

Communal Discernment in Organizational Settings

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HALF OF MANAGERIAL DECISIONS FAIL. Studies of senior managers show that half of all decisions made by them are no longer being implemented after two years.¹ Senior managers use the most successful decision-making practices least often and the least successful practices most often. Most managers can, in retrospect, identify their successful and unsuccessful decisions, but they rarely analyze what they have discovered systematically, in such a way that they learn from their mistakes. Thus they slip into failure-prone ways of making decisions time and again.

They may impose decisions on others by edict or by persuasion. They may approach decisions as no more than problems to be solved, rather than as opportunities for collaboration, learning and teamwork. Or they may cut off the exploration of alternatives too soon. Successful decision-making practices are more participative: they may involve articulating objectives and asking employees to discover ways of meeting those objectives. These successful practices encourage learning and innovation, and are likely to result in decisions which prove beneficial to an organization over the long term. The failure-prone practices often result in poor decisions which may be financially costly, bad for the organization's reputation, and even ethically unsound. Well-known failures include Disney's decision to locate EuroDisney near Paris, Ford's decision not to redesign the Pinto's petrol tank after the risk of explosion was discovered, and Nestlé's

¹ Paul Nutt's extensive studies over the past 25 years use the criterion of whether a decision is put to use long-term as the primary indicator of its success. See Nutt, 'Surprising but True: Half the Decisions in Organizations Fail', *Academy of Management Executive*, 13 (1999), 77.

decision to continue to market infant milk-formula in developing countries.²

Most leaders within organizations want to make good decisions, and they do not fail for want of trying. But they often slip into decision-making practices that do not serve them well because of time pressure, the need to appear decisive, or the unrealistic expectations of boards and employees. Spiritual discernment, whether individual or communal, can help leaders to navigate these dangers, and to make decisions that will stand the test of time. Individual and communal discernment dance together, hand in hand. Communal discernment requires individuals to have prepared their hearts and minds. For its part, individual discernment is dependent on a community to which individuals are accountable, and which nurtures and grounds their personal spiritual lives, as well as providing checks and balances to counteract excesses.

I would like to focus on communal discernment here, considering what it looks like when practised in organizational life, and offering examples of how two early twenty-first-century organizations use it to make better decisions.

Communal Discernment

What is communal spiritual discernment like? Its tone is one of openness and trust: towards one another and towards the transcendent. In order for a group to use communal discernment in its decision-making, it needs to establish a foundation of mutual respect and trust. If the group lacks this, its members will not be able to discern together. To set the tone of openness to one another and to the transcendent in a meeting, a facilitator will often open with prayer or a meditation. Group members may be asked to share something of their own spirituality with one another, in order to help them become familiar with the spiritual landscape of the group, the ground for their discernment together. They will practise listening deeply to themselves and to one another, learning to discern when to speak and when to remain silent. The focus is on seeking God's wisdom and guidance in the situation at hand. They will learn how to listen for this, seeking

² Paul Nutt, *Why Decisions Fail: Avoiding the Blunders and Traps that Lead to Debacles* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), xv.

deeper wisdom within themselves, hearing it from deep within one another, hearing it in the silent moments in between. They will learn the appropriate rhythm for discernment, a less hurried pace than that of most meetings in business settings. As discernment gradually becomes part of an organization's culture, these practices will become second nature.

At the end of a meeting, the facilitator may invite a group to reflect on what has happened. Was there a sense of freedom in the group? Was everyone included? Was the whole person included—body, mind, emotions, spirit? Was enough time given for the decision? Was there a sense of unhurried presence?

Communal discernment is most often discussed and practised in religious settings. How can it be translated into the setting of a business or other organization? How can a practice which is rooted in religion work among people who may represent diverse religious traditions or perhaps no religious tradition at all? To answer these questions, I shall turn to two organizations, one a medical centre and the other a spiritually based community-development organization incorporating two businesses and several social service agencies.

The Mercy Medical Center

The Mercy Medical Center was founded in 1916 as St Joseph Mercy Hospital in Mason City, Iowa, by the Sisters of Mercy. Today the hospital and network sites employ 2,760 people and admit over 12,359 in-patients a year. Communal discernment, which is practised by Sisters of Mercy, found its way into Mercy Medical Center through the various sisters who served as President from its founding until 1995. Even after 1995, when the declining number of sisters with suitable administrative experience required that the centre move towards a lay leadership, communal discernment remained a central practice. Today the senior leadership team retains an element of communal discernment in all its meetings and practises communal discernment more fully in selected meetings. Other groups within the organization also practise it.

Senior leadership meetings (consisting of the CEO, the seven Vice-Presidents, the Mission Leader, and a Sister of Mercy Administrative Assistant) always open with prayer or a reflection to set a tone of openness to the transcendent. Members of the team enter the meeting



Mercy Medical Center, Mason City, Iowa

assuming that they are responsible to something beyond themselves. The presence of the Mission Leader at these meetings is testimony to a commitment to bring questions of the greater purpose into every decision that is made. At Mercy Medical, the Mission Leader is not just a figurehead, but is expected to be a prominent voice in all decision-making. As Doug Morse, the Senior VP for network and clinic management, puts it:

Our mission leader sits on the senior leadership team, and is very vocal. So even when we're talking about nursing and personnel issues or anything financial, we have our mission person bringing us back to the larger context, giving us the ever-present reminders and input of the mission side.³

A spirit of stewardship pervades senior leadership team meetings, a sense that they are holding the institution in trust for the sake of its larger purpose.

³ In conversation with the author. Subsequent quotations without footnote references also come from interviews with the author.

Whenever a major decision needs to be made, the senior leadership team uses (or delegates a subcommittee to use) a formal communal discernment practice known as mission discernment. This is a way of hard-wiring attention to discernment and mission into decision-making at the most senior level. The process is described in a booklet, *Mission Discernment*, distributed to the board, to the senior leadership team, and to various other leaders throughout the system. At Mercy Medical, attention to the transcendent is just as important as attention to spreadsheets and to clinical issues. All these considerations contributed to a mutually respectful dialogue.

The booklet provides practical, step-by-step guidelines for using mission discernment, as a way of making the spirituality in the institution something with real influence. The guidelines are laid out alongside a mission statement, phrase by phrase, ensuring that each aspect of the statement will be taken into account thoroughly. For example, alongside the second phrase of the mission statement, ‘in the spirit of the Gospel’, the guidelines ask: ‘How does the initiative under consideration present Trinity Health with opportunities to demonstrate and foster its Mission and Core Values?’ And alongside the third phrase, ‘to heal body, mind, and spirit’, they ask: ‘How does the proposal under consideration affect the ability of the Trinity Health Member Organization to provide spiritual care?’

In addition to offering such specific questions, the booklet provides a more general context for mission discernment by outlining issues such as the purpose and timing of the process:

Purpose

Mission Discernment is a reflective process intended to stimulate discussion among decision-makers that will enable them to identify and report, in mission and values terms, explicit reasons for or against a particular proposed course of action The Mission Discernment Process is intended to ensure that, in the course of making major decisions, appropriate business and clinical analyses are evaluated in light of the Mission and Core Values.⁴

⁴ *Mission Discernment*, 1.

Process timing

The process of mission discernment begins when a previously discussed possibility or alternative is in need of clear analysis and decision. The process should proceed in conjunction with other components of the project The purpose and value of Mission Discernment is missed if the process is employed after all other elements of the deliberation have been concluded.⁵

Recently the mission discernment process was used to determine whether Mercy Medical should open a pre-adolescent psychiatric services programme. Because other Iowa hospitals had closed their programmes, children were being brought to Mercy's emergency room from great distances away, with nowhere else to go. CEO Jim Fitzpatrick assembled a team to consider the issue using the mission discernment process. This was, he said, 'expensive (in terms of senior leadership's time) but worth it in the long run (in terms of depth of consideration, spiritual grounding, and buy-in from all sectors)'. The Mission Leader and Mission Fellow led a collaborative process which involved the VP of finance and several Behavioral Services and Emergency Room clinicians.

According to Senior VP Doug Morse, for some the decision would have been very easy because 'there's no money in it, it requires staff you can't hire and space you don't have'. But for Mercy it required serious wrestling. While the financial and clinical aspects were carefully considered, the discernment team also weighed Mercy's core value of caring for the 'poor and underserved', especially women and children. They identified three options: building and opening a pre-adolescent behavioural programme of their own; continuing to provide limited 24-48 hour admission for crisis support and stabilisation, and then transferring patients to facilities in Des Moines; or working in partnership with another local centre to help their programme strengthen its services. The team presented their report to the operations team (a subcommittee of the senior leadership team). On the basis of the mission discernment process, the operations team decided to continue with limited stabilisation support while remaining open to future collaboration with the local centre, feeling that this

⁵ *Mission Discernment, 2.*

option honoured Mercy's mission and best served the needs of the children.

Mission discernment has been used in several other cases: notably in relation to a joint venture for an ambulatory surgery centre and to consider the access to pharmaceutical care in a rural community. The process was also started in relation to the common practice of not accepting patients who have no insurance into a skilled unit. Mission Leader Jim Spencer reports:

Moments into the process we determined that this common policy (around the country) was not consistent with our mission. There was no need to continue with a mission discernment.

Nevertheless, mission discernment is not a 'magic bullet', as these cases illustrate:

The consistent use of the Mission Discernment process assures the synthesis and integration of the mission, values, business and clinical impacts of proposed initiatives, thereby promoting responsible decisions. The process cannot offer perfect solutions to complex situations, but ... it will enable Trinity Health to make consistent steps in more faithfully fulfilling its mission [It] also will help leaders and staff become more adept at identifying mission and values issues in the life and work of the organization.⁶

The Greyston Foundation

David Rome, senior Vice-President of the Greyston Foundation, is the first to admit that integrating the spiritual dimension into a complex organization is not easy. Nevertheless, Greyston has been faithfully experimenting, for over twenty years, with various ways of doing just that.

The Greyston Foundation has grown from a bakery, founded in 1982 by Bernie Glassman, into the \$14-million, 180-employee organization that it is today, serving 1200 people annually through a variety of enterprises. Greyston has a well-articulated philosophy, based on Buddhist principles, which underpins its corporate decision-making

⁶ *Mission Discernment*, 4.

and discernment. When he founded Greyston, Bernie Glassman adopted the image of a mandala to describe its mission:

In Buddhism, the mandala is a circular diagram representing the different aspects of life within a balanced and harmonious whole; it represents the unity and interdependence of life. Within Greyston, the term is used on three levels to denote

- the well-balanced individual
- the well-functioning community
- the integration of the individual within community.⁷

Each Greyston organization, each team within an organization, as well as Greyston as a whole, carries within its consciousness an awareness of the interdependence of all. PathMaking Services, the soul-tending part

of Greyston, has developed a balance sheet which individuals, departments and organizations within Greyston use to assess how well they are living out the interdependence represented by the mandala. The awareness of interdependence provides the foundation for communal discernment, because it implies that no one person has all of the truth, but that each has a part of the truth and each must listen for the parts that others bring.



Furthermore, Greyston stresses community-building as an outward manifestation of this interdependence, both within and outside the organization. As Julius Walls, CEO of Greyston Bakery, puts it:

We believe the way to overcome social and economic problems, fundamentally, is by building strong community. So Greyston itself has to be a strong community. This is different from the way people think of a traditional nonprofit, where a group of professionals

⁷ <http://www.greyston.org/01-mandala/011-concept.html>.

provide services to a group of unfortunates. We are all involved together in creating healthy community.⁸

David Rome underscores the importance of community, noting the tremendous growth ‘among the so-called professionals, many of whose lives have been turned around from working here’, and adding:

Our mission talks about healing the rejected parts of society as well as the rejected parts of ourselves, so we try not to play into the class system of ‘us helping them’.⁹

With this understanding of interdependence and this experience of community, the stage is set for integrating spiritual practices into decision-making processes. For David Rome, ‘it is all about being able to shift gears, slow down, step back, and be contemplative’.¹⁰

Bernie Glassman articulates a threefold sequence for perceiving reality:

- not-knowing—shedding preconceived notions;
- bearing witness—gazing steadily at what is;
- healing—taking action that will lead to spiritual transformation and healing.

Members of the Greyston community have learned to use this discernment process individually, and they have also experimented with using it communally.

The Way of Council, a Native American practice, is used regularly by Greyston Family Support Services and by various other Greyston groups in senior management meetings, in large community meetings, and in small business-focused discussions. Participants sit in a circle, and people may speak only when they receive a ‘talking piece’, an object which they hold. They observe five guidelines: listening from the heart; speaking from the heart; being spontaneous, being of ‘lean expression’; and respecting confidentiality. This practice has served Greyston well. When Greyston’s senior management team uses the

⁸ Quoted in Dinah Wakeford, ‘Healing Society, Healing Ourselves at Greyston Bakery: A Conversation with David Rome and Julius Walls’, *Fieldnotes: A Newsletter of the Shambhala Institute*, 4 (March 2004), 4.

⁹ Quoted in Wakeford, ‘Healing Society, Healing Ourselves’, 4.

¹⁰ Quoted in Wakeford, ‘Healing Society, Healing Ourselves’, 2.

process, they meet in a special room, different from the one used for regular business meetings. They have found that council trains them in listening deeply and respectfully to one another, and in recognising where the discussion goes beyond communication between individuals. This training helps them to let go of preconceived notions, bear witness to what is, and discern right action when they come together to do business.

Business meetings begin with silence in order to create space for deep listening. 'One of the nice things about silence, which is very much a part of the Buddhist tradition', remarks David Rome, 'is that it seems to work for everyone, because there are no words'. He notes that, during the silence, Buddhists meditate, Christians may pray, and those unaffiliated with a spiritual tradition may take a few moments for reflection. After the silence comes a transitional period, as members go around the circle saying something about how they are feeling that day. Greyston leaders are also currently experimenting with the practice of dialogue as a way to bring the three aspects of discernment more fully into business meetings. Meetings occasionally close with silence as well.



The Greyston Foundation Headquarters



Roshi Bernard Glassman with Wendy Powell, a former employee

The Greyston senior management team takes a quarterly day-long retreat off-site to step back and look at the big picture. In David Rome's words, this helps people 'become more present in themselves and more present to the group'.¹¹

When asked to reflect on the most important things that he has learned from his work at Greyston, especially with regard to integrating spirituality into organizational processes, David Rome responds, 'Hang in there; things take longer than one would expect or like'.¹²

An important reason why managerial decisions fail is that leaders give in to pressure to make decisions too quickly.¹³ By incorporating communal discernment into their decision-making processes, Mercy Medical Center and the Greyston Foundation have tried to slow themselves down, to take into account more than just financial

¹¹ Quoted in Wakeford, 'Healing Society, Healing Ourselves', 2.

¹² Quoted in Wakeford, 'Healing Society, Healing Ourselves', 4.

¹³ See Nutt, 'Surprising but True' and Nutt, *Why Decisions Fail*.

considerations, and thus to make better decisions. With this approach, there is no division between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ after the decision is made. These organizations have discovered that communal discernment is much more likely to result in agreement from all participants, because everyone has had a part in the decision. Decisions are better supported and more wholeheartedly implemented than those made by edict or persuasion.¹⁴

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¹⁴ This article grew out of Margaret Benefiel’s new book, *Soul at Work* (New York: Seabury, 2005). Used with permission.