

GROUP DISCERNMENT OVERVIEW

The following is a brief summary of:

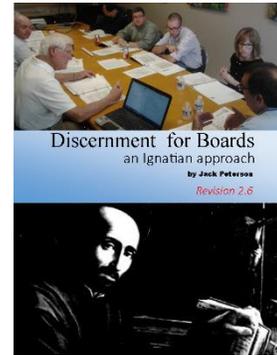
Discernment for Boards: an Ignatian approach

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Discernment for groups is a process of making good choices that reflect God's and our own deepest desires for ourselves and each other. It is based on St. Ignatius Loyola's Rules for Discernment for individuals, found in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Discernment for groups involves, first, individual members opening themselves to God's gracious direction about how they will contribute to the group decision. Second, it requires the group as a whole opening itself to God's gentle promptings coming through individuals and the group as a whole. (Click [here](#) for a 3 minute introductory video tutorial, [Discernment for Boards](#).)

The Spirit of Discernment: Ignatian Discernment is more about a relationship than a step by step process. To bear fruit, we must embrace some predispositions, which collectively we call a Spirit of Discernment. The predispositions are about our relationships—with God, ourselves and others—relationships that must be built on trust. Here are some questions to assess in ourselves the predispositions necessary for fruitful group discernment.

1. Trusting God
 - a. Do we trust that God desires what is best for us?
 - b. Do we trust that we can discover God's will for us?
 - c. Do we trust that God will provide the grace we need?
 - d. Can God succeed even if we discern imperfectly?
2. Trusting ourselves
 - a. Do we trust that our own deepest desires mirror God's desires for us?
 - b. Do we trust our ability to navigate surprise?
 - c. Can we trust ourselves to survive silence?
 - d. Can we face our limitations and biases honestly?
3. Trusting others
 - a. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit is capable of speaking through anyone?
 - b. Do we trust that others are seeking the good?

Click [here](#) for a 5 minute video tutorial, [The Spirit of Discernment](#).

The Habit of Discernment: It will also help greatly if the individuals who are engaged in group discernment have developed a habit of discernment in their own lives. Here are four habits that will strengthen our ability to discern and to participate in discernment with others.

1. *Praying for knowledge of God's will*, very intentionally. If we have trouble truly desiring God's will above our own, we can still pray for the desire for the desire. If we do this regularly our lives will be less centered on ourselves and more on God, whose desires for us are better than we can imagine for ourselves.
2. *Cultivating silence*. Any time we intentionally stop talking and let go of the noise and distractions around us, we allow the subtle urgings of the Holy Spirit to influence our outlook and our choices. 15-20 minutes of such silence once or twice a day is great, but even a minute of such silence at various points in the day can be powerful.
3. *The daily Examen*. Reflect back on each day with openness to where God was present in our thoughts, words, experiences and actions, and where God did not seem to be present. This opens us to insights about ourselves and helps us learn how God is acting in our lives.
4. *The Pedagogical Paradigm*, a model for teaching and learning based on Ignatius' own spiritual conversion which provides a natural structure for making sound decisions, consisting of 5 stages:
 - a. Context: The background we need to begin the discernment of an important question, including understanding precisely what the question is and who should be making the decision
 - b. Experience: Our own and others' experience related to this question, and acknowledgement of how this impacts our viewpoint
 - c. Reflection: Searching for the deeper meaning, root causes and consequences of the facts and experiences brought to the fore in the prior two stages
 - d. Action: Even if imperfect, reflection must lead to a decision and some sort of responsible action to bring about the results desired
 - e. Evaluation: Because our actions are never perfect, we assess the outcomes to learn what did and didn't work. This then becomes the Context for the next time we discern about this and related questions.

Click [here](#) to watch a 6 minute video tutorial, [The Habit of Discernment](#).

Six Components: How group discernment is carried out will vary greatly, depending on the questions being discerned and the nature of the group itself, but it will always consist of the following six components

1. *Triage*: One or more individuals assess how deep the process must be to discern the question appropriately and then propose that to the group. (A Discernment Triage worksheet and scenarios can be found on our website in the [RESOURCES](#) tab.)
2. *Information gathering*: Identify and collect the information that is believed to be necessary to make a good decision, without collecting so much information that it weighs down the process unnecessarily.
3. *Individual prayer and reflection*: Prepare as individuals for group discussion by asking for God's guidance and using the Pedagogical Paradigm. Emphasis is placed on the first three stages—Context, Experience and Reflection—to allow experiences, feelings and insights often deep within in us to rise to consciousness. (An Individual Prayer and Reflection worksheet can be found on our website in the [RESOURCES](#) tab.)

4. *Group discussion*: Structure discussion to assure that the Holy Spirit can enter the process through the good will of all involved (see *Core Tools*, below).
5. *Making the decision*: Come to the final choice in a way that all can support, even if some individuals wouldn't have chosen the outcome if left to themselves.
6. *Implementation*: Follow through to make sure the clarity and intentions achieved during the discernment process are mirrored in how the decision is carried out.

Click [here](#) to watch a 6 minute video tutorial, [The Six Components of Group Discernment](#).

Four Core Tools: Though group discernment can be highly complex and nuanced, there are a few tools which if a group is not already using them will move it toward deeper discernment:

1. *Praying for God's will*: During meetings, as individuals and as a group pausing to re-center ourselves on our desire to serve God in our work together and asking for God's help
2. *Cultivating silence*: Taking time at various points in meetings individually and as a group to create a silent space where the Holy Spirit can speak to us and we can hear the thoughts and feelings that come from deeper within us.
3. *Reviewing Ground Rules*: Making a mutual commitment to observe ways of working together that maximize our openness and collective wisdom. For example:
 - a. All are willing to listen deeply to themselves, to others and to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit present in the group as a whole.
 - b. All will trust that others are speaking with good intentions and bringing information and perspectives important to the issue.
 - c. All are willing to share their perspective even if it seems different than the prevailing opinion.
 - d. All will seek, not to win arguments or pursue their individual interests, but to have the interior freedom to recognize and desire God's will.
4. *Round Robins*: At least once during important discussions go around the room to make sure that every voice is being heard.

Click [here](#) to watch a 4 minute video tutorial, [The Four Core Tools of Discernment](#).

More information on group discernment and other issues for faith-based schools, including [books](#), free [videos](#) and [downloads](#), is available at www.managingformission.com.