

# Discernment and Strategic Decision Making

## *Reflections for a Spirituality of Organizational Leadership*

Andre' L. Delbecq  
Santa Clara University

Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM  
San Francisco Theological Seminary

John Mostyn, CSC  
Christian Brothers Iona Institute

Paul C. Nutt  
Ohio State University

Gordan Walter  
University of British Columbia

### **Background Critical Incident**

In the past six months Jerry has been practicing a form of meditation called Centering Prayer. His original decision to attend a workshop on meditation was to deal with his increased sense of work overload, stress and burnout associated with the demands of his position as CEO of Healthcare. However, he learned that meditation can also be prayer, and he has found his practice very helpful. Although during Centering Prayer he is often aware of the distractions of his busy "business mind," nonetheless he has noticed that during the day is better able to focus at work, is less irritable, and more willing to listen to others as a result of incorporating contemplative practice as part of each day. Even his wife and children have remarked he "seems more mellow these days."

He frequently often precedes Centering Prayer with a short period of spiritual reading, some times reflecting on a passage from scripture, other times reflecting on articles or books by spiritual writers. This week prior to Centering prayer has been reading a reflection by Mother Teresa, and has been meditating on her charismatic "solidarity" with the less fortunate.

He was aware that it was this earlier reading that provoked him to action when his Administrative Assistant indicated they had received another phone call concerned with the closing of the Arkansas regional office. This time the call was from a Physician stating that the manner of the closing was not in keeping with the values and culture of Healthhelp. Jerry decided to drop a note to the Regional Vice President, John Burnham. He asked John to add a discussion of the closing and the planned move to Atlanta to his briefing when he would be in Arkansas next week.

Jerry hadn't paid a great deal of attention to the forthcoming closure and move. Dr. John Burnham was the most recently appointed Regional Vice President in Healthhelp, a young Physician Executive in his first major position with very strong credentials and exceptional communication skills. John had made a convincing presentation regarding the desirability of moving the Headquarters to Atlanta. He had pointed out that Healthhelp was expanding most rapidly in South Eastern Seaboard states, and that it would be easier to recruit physician administrators and staff to Atlanta than to AK as leadership "bubbled up" from these locations.

Further, The Center for Disease Control and major medical schools and facilities were in Atlanta. Proximity to these clinical centers that would allow intellectual cross fertilization with clinical leaders in Healthhelp. Finally, he had pointed out that the HQ lease was going to be terminated in the office complex in AK requiring the HQ to move in any event. So it would be a good time to take consider the advantages of relocating the HQ to Atlanta. It all seemed very reasonable. As Healthhelp had a commitment to decentralization of strategy to regional office leadership, the financial implications were modest, and the argument was articulately made. Jerry had put the matter out of his mind. Normally, he would not reopen a strategic decision that had received prior approval, but he decided to honor his uneasy stomach regarding the telephone calls his office had received.

Jerry's first thought was that the phone calls might simply reflect that Healthhelp might not be offering the needed assistance to employees to help them bridge the move, either by transferring to Atlanta or seeking other employment if they chose to remain in Arkansas. This seemed a manageable issue to resolve. However, he knew he needed to be sensitive and not undermine John's leadership, so in his morning prayer he asked for guidance for sensitivity and the ability to listen carefully.

As the briefing took place, Jerry carefully listened to the logic, and the unfolding plans with special attention. As he did, the relocation activity now seemed to have new dimensions he had not anticipated:

John, just six months into his position and involved in several turn-around efforts, had not taken time to share information regarding the forthcoming move with his organization excepting his immediate executive team. His logic for keeping the issue "among his tip confidants" was "if everyone knows the details about the move, some key players may take other positions prior to the actual relocation leaving us short handed". This concerned Jerry. He phone calls indicated that word of the move has seeped out, but more importantly, there was the issue of justice in giving people adequate time to prepare for a radical impact on employment and families.

There were other concerns as well. The location John was considering in Atlanta was in a far Western suburb. ("Wonderful schools, great residential areas", John enthusiastically reported.) Yet Jerry knew enough about traffic patterns in Atlanta to be concerned that that such a location would isolate the HQ far from the sought for synergies with the Central City Health complexes.

Sensing John had "made up his mind" and knowing it was going to be difficult to re-approach the issue, Jerry opened his concerns through h the lens of Healthhelp's values and culture. Healthhelp primarily owned medical centers serving less advantaged central city populations. The company itself have been formed through a merger of several smaller religious based medical centers which found it uneconomic to continue to operate as free standing centers in the competitive new health care industry requiring greater economics of scale. However, there had been careful attention to retaining a culture that was "missionary" in nature and Healthhelp had retained it niche in providing medical services to the under served. Most of its centers were in Central City locations. Retention of physician partners and staff was largely a function of these medical personnel feeling they were part of health providing community with a special focus on urban poor. The company had also created a decision culture in which these medical professionals felt they were full participants who shared decisions in developing services to this difficult market segment. Most professional and technical staff could easily obtain positions in more affluent settings. In truth, they stayed with Healthhelp because they felt they were full participants in a noble medical mission. Jerry spoke for some time regarding this history and culture, reaching to the spiritual values undergirding the Healthhelp culture which included respect for the choice made by each employee to choose to work in more difficult urban environments as a form of dedicated service.

Gently he suggested that it was important for John to share with the Headquarters' staff the logic of the forthcoming move, enlist their thinking so that the reasons for the move were seen as valid

and based on a broad consensus, and ask for their help in facilitating the transition. For those not able or willing to move, Jerry suggested Healthhelp owed more than simply a 30 day notice. Assistance should be given (especially for the non-professional staff) in resume writing and job search skills.

John listened to Jerry respectfully, but displayed a rather sullen demeanor. They agreed Jerry would rearrange his schedule to return on his way back from the Northeast for an "all-hands" Regional headquarters meeting.

On his flight to the Northeast, Jerry wondered if the planned move had originally been proposed for the convenience and preferences of John and his new executive team, or if the move was really responsive truly sought the synergies of Atlanta. He decided it would be important for him to be entirely open, not be prejudge, and to help elicit the discernment of the Headquarters Team. But it would also be important not to undermine the credibility of the talented new Vice President. "All that was required was the wisdom of Solomon", he thought, "something to pray for indeed!"

The all hands meeting went well. John had accepted the need for open communication, and had been very forthcoming regarding the logic of the move, and the preliminary planning. As a result, there seemed to be a reestablishment of trust as the issues were openly shared. Further, the original logic for the move seemed confirmed in the experience across the different headquarter leaders, both clinical and managerial. Recruitment had been an increasing problem for both groups. Travel costs were higher since AK lacked a hub airport, and given the decentralized model of decision making, HQ staff felt increasingly burdened by not being closer to their major market bases. It was at least an additional half day each trip to return to Arkansas. The potential intellectual stimulation for clinical leaders by being in Atlanta close the medical research centers created a sense of excitement on the part of the physician leaders. The willingness of Healthhelp to provide additional assistance to those not able to desiring to move was seen and generous, and a six months lead time prior to making a move was agreed upon in the meeting as helpful to all in making the transition. Jerry sensed John seemed relieved to have shared the overall strategy and to have his thinking confirmed. Various leaders agreed to travel to Atlanta to scout the "reality" of the potential synergies, and to visit the proposed site for the new regional headquarter complex and to compare the site with alternative possible locations. Jerry asked to be kept in the loop as the information was share, and agreed to return in three months for a follow-up briefing.

During this visit three months later, Jerry found considerable differences of opinion had emerged between the physician leaders and the management leaders. The physician administrators indicated that their scouting suggested proximity to the Central City medical complex was important. Busy professionals in the university medical center, Center for Disease Control, and related medical complexes would be "open to shared learning" but it would require an exchange of "residency supervision" and "clinical participation." The physician administrator's favored location in a office complex "close in" to Central Atlanta. In contrast, the management team favored the far Western suburban location, citing more favorable lease rates, better schools, and more favorable residential settings.

Rather than trying to resolve the difference by debate, Jerry suggested that they seek more information. Perhaps the City of Atlanta might be willing to provide some tax relief that would mitigate the cost differences? Jerry and John agreed to meet with city leaders. Could they explore more carefully housing options closer in? One of the management leaders agreed to return for another look. (He later reflected that practice of Centering Prayer was allowing him to be more patient. At an earlier period as CEO he would have tried to force the issue.)

In fact, Jerry and John found the City was very cooperative and was willing to provide a very attractive package of tax and initial bridge funding for a close in location, with one surprising stipulation: that Healthhelp open an outpatient clinic in a minority neighborhood close to where the pro-offered headquarter complex would be located.

This was an entirely new wrinkle that frustrated John. Jerry suggested they maintain an open mind and take the challenge back to AK and discuss it with the management and physician leaders.

Jerry sensed that the delays and new wrinkles were tempting a number of HQ leaders to want to short cut the decision process. Their attitude was "let's make a decision. This is taking too long." He felt that it was anxiety and uncertainty that was causing the impatience. He returned to prayer, asking for guidance that whatever decision unfolded would work for the greater good. He realized that he needed God's help in this complex set of challenges.

In reopening the discussion at the next gathering, Jerry asked the group to spend a few minutes in silence, reflecting on the challenges they were facing in light of the noble mission of serving the urban poor that was at the core of Healthhelp's mission. Following the silence, the discussion began in a more subdued and reflective tone that earlier "over-coffee" remarks before the formal deliberations.

Several Managers together with the physician leaders saw a creative opportunity in sponsoring an outpatient neighborhood clinic. They felt such a clinic could be a center to "test" a variety of innovations in providing health delivery to under served populations. They felt participants from a variety of SE Healthhelp medical centers might share "experiments" in a neutral Atlanta experimental center. Then if clinical outcomes were superior, such experiments could be more easily be transferred back to the "at home" healthcare centers within the system. Physician resistance might in such a fashion be decreased on a number of needed changes.

For these managers and clinical leaders, this concept reinforced their preference for the close - in location. A shift was occurring, with some members of the management team who favored the suburban location now in the minority, although still a sizeable group. For these managers a primary concern was k-12 educational opportunities. "Not much of a recruiting advantage if we are in a poor school system, and have to commute a long distance to live where there are quality schools", remarked one manager.

That evening in his hotel room, Jerry was surprised by a knock on the door at 10:00pm. John was there looking tired and concerned. Jerry invited him in, and John sunk deeply into a chair. "Jerry, I have a sensitive and embarrassing problem and I need your help." For several minutes his spoke no further, but then taking a deep breath he said: "It's the race card."\_ Jerry waited quietly which John sat for what seemed a very long time in further silence. "My CFO would never say it was a race issue. Education is used as the proxy, but that is what it is. This is the South. Yes, I know our mission is to serve the urban poor. Yes, I recruit being very up front regarding the mission. In the abstract, being a financial manager working for a corporation serving the poor sounds noble. But now ..... Well, living near/with and being in close contact with blacks in an experimental center..... That changes the equation." John did not speak again for some time. Jerry waited patiently. "I could confront the issue with words, but the result would be that given our move Ethan would simply receive an unexpected offer, and take two of his subordinates with him. .... silence ..... of course he may do that anyway."

Jerry waited a few minutes before responding. He trusted that the right expression would come to him. "I think you are right. I don't think this is a matter of words or argument. I think it has to be a matter of experience and a test of the heart. Then if Ethan still feels the same way, we face the difficulty of his departure. John, what is the name of the chief of staff at our Savannah Healthhelp?" The chief of staff at Savannah was a much beloved Black American who had been an inspiration to many managers and physician leaders. His was a particularly skilled and loving presence in serving his people. "Dr. Moses Richards" replied John. "Why don't you call Dr. Richards and ask if he has someone who might accompany Ethan for a visit to meet some of the leaders and people our Center will be serving in Atlanta?" replied Jerry. See if you can arrange

the visit soon, and ask Ethan to report back on his experience at your next "HQ Move" strategy meeting.

For the next two weeks Jerry returned to deep prayer. He knew the loss of Ethan would be a great blow to John and the Regional Headquarters. However, he believed that the only way he could proceed was to enable the organization to go deeper into the wounds of society.

Two weeks later John called. Ethan has been introduced to Dr. Abraham Jones, a medical doctor with the University Hospital near where the future Headquarters might be located. Dr. Jones had introduced Ethan to black community leaders, and taken Ethan on a tour of the neighborhood meeting the people the Center might serve. They had spend time with the young and the old, as well as visiting schools. Then the had lunched with Church and Neighbor leaders. Finally, Dr. Jones had taken Ethan that evening to his home in a lovely close-in neighborhood for dinner with friends, white and black, many associated with the health care complexes in Atlanta, but some also with corporations.

"Jerry, you can't imagine the difference. Ethan has become an enthusiastic supporter of the close-in strategy, and has even been in touch with two of the Corporate Leaders for support in funding the Center during the first two years of startup." Jerry listened to the full report, thanked John and set the phone down gently. Closing his eyes, he was overcome with a full sense of gratitude and tears flowed.

Yesterday, six months after Jerry had requested the follow-up briefing on the Regional Hospital move, Jerry learned that the Managerial and Physician Staffs in AK had agreed by a large majority to select the in close location for the New Headquarters: Their public reasons given were:

Proximity to the major tertiary medical complexes.

Opportunities for Headquarters to operate an experimental outpatient medical center.

Both features making recruiting of physician administrators and clinical HQ staff more feasible.

Attractive residential neighborhoods within limited commuting distance with good schools.

Proximity to the Atlanta Airport.

Jerry endorsed the plans in a conference call the next day, but also counseled the clinical and management team leadership team keep their feet on the ground, moves were stressful, and opening an experimental neighborhood healthcare center a new stretch objective. "Let's continue to evaluate progress, and be careful not to bite off more than we can chew in the first two years." And then he added: "I am proud of all of you for finding a way to strengthen Healthhelp's commitment to America's under served urban poor." There was even a little applause over the phone line, unusual among the rather staid healthcare professionals.

In a later meeting John also reported a new spirit of collaboration had emerged at Headquarters bridging some historical tensions between management executives and clinical physician leader. There is heightened morale, excitement about their new "laboratory" to test innovation being associated with Headquarters, and a renewed commitment to Healthhelp's mission to serve urban poor. Then John added: "Jerry, you have been very helpful in mentoring me through this important experience. I'm not sure how you remained so calm, open, and undisturbed during the uncertainties and tensions. Maybe next time we are together we can schedule time to talk a

little more about how you live with the tensions of senior leadership. But for now, I just want to say this. At first I was irritated when you reopened the location decision. Now I am thankful. I learned a great deal through your guidance! Thank you"

As John was speaking, Jerry's other phone began ringing. He did not pick it up, but pressed the hold button, allowing John to finish. After a few final words of farewell he punched the button to the other line. He knew it would be an important call since his secretary would see he was on line one. "Jerry, Ben here. The California Nurses Association has just called for strike on our medical center commencing in two weeks. We need an immediate meeting of our executive team!" Jerry paused, smiling to himself. "Not much time to savor the last phone call, he thought." Then he turned his full attention to the challenge at hand.

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership and decision making are tightly intertwined. The daily life of leaders encompass constant decisions: to share or not share information, to act or delay, to confront or avoid, to promote from within or from outside, to centralize or decentralize, to open or close specific company locations and so forth. Decision-making is the pivotal and causal leadership process required to effect organizational action.

However, decision making at senior levels poses special demands. Here decisions include many challenges such as facilitating the development of a shared organizational vision and sustaining implementation through adversity. Obviously strategic decisions such as these involve more than rational-technical considerations. These decisions arise in complex contexts that have many diverse stakeholders. The required decision paths involve elaborate and not easily integrated chains of causation. Implementation must be achieved through collaboration of loosely coupled organizational entities. All this confounding difficulty is amplified as decisions occur in contexts of competitive pressures and rapidly changing technology that accelerate the rate of change.

Such decision complexity means leaders must confront the limits of bounded rationality and can no longer rely solely on simple analytic tools. Leadership now requires moving beyond risk control, and uncertainty models which often sub-optimize, into the more equivocal, ambiguous, incalculable, domain of judgment and intuition. An intuitive holistic perspective that integrates wisdom, human sensitivity, and value premises now must be combined with analytic techniques for effective senior leadership. For a leader to meet these challenges without resort to over-control also requires personal integration and a high level of moral functioning (Gardner, 1995; Posner and Kouzes, 1992). In combination, these challenges have prompted an interest in coupling the insights from older wisdom and spiritual traditions to modern decision theory.

What might the Christian spiritual tradition of *discernment* add to a normative *strategic decision making* process? In what way does the older tradition of discernment differ from modern decision theory? In what ways are these two traditions for guiding complex action complementary? By looking at both conceptualizations together this paper suggests enriched ways for the contemporary manager to deal with decision making challenges.

A word about the flow of this paper. In Section One we provide an introduction to Christian discernment, its assumptions, and its theological premises. In Section Two we offer an introduction to some recent research into strategic decision theory. These two sections provide a conceptual foundation for our arguments and suggestions. In Section Three we discuss causes of strategic decision failures. Then in Section Four we offer a decision process attempting to integrate the two perspectives. This portion of the paper provides our "pragmatic guide" for a leader drawing on combined perspectives. Some may prefer to read this section first as an orientation to the more theoretical sections. Finally, in Section Five we will summarize what this juxtaposition of Christian discernment with strategic decision theory suggests for contemporary senior leadership.

## Section One

### AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

When we use the term "discernment" in common speech, we usually mean some kind of discrimination. The Christian practice of discernment assumes this foundational meaning, but focuses this discrimination in a particular outcome: *the call of God as it comes to us in the midst of daily life*. The ebb and flow of life is the context of the decisions that must be faced daily in the exercise of one's role (vocation). The Mystery we call God may appear quite obscure and hidden under the routines, passions, distractions and messiness of human existence. *Discernment is the process of developing eyes to see God in the midst of ordinary, finite existence, to allow ourselves to be stirred by this God and called into a vocation of service in God's creative project*. In this view, for the business executive the call of God lies in the midst of the very activity of leading one's organization.

Strategic decision-making and discernment are related in that they are both processes of approaching thoughtful choice. Discernment is the older tradition. We could fruitfully imagine that they are mother and daughter. The discernment tradition emphasizes a deep, broad and subjective approach in which one seeks access to fundamental wisdom when faced with complex choices. Although ancient, the discernment approach has a great deal to commend itself to leaders today. It invites them to consider the deeper issues of freedom both individually and institutionally.

It is important to state at the outset that one of the basic assumptions in the Christian discernment tradition contradicts popular wisdom: the discernment tradition assumes that the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred is false (Snook, 1999). Stated positively, it assumes that the Mystery we call God approaches all of humanity through the very concrete works and lives that we lead. In this tradition, the entire work week of the executive is permeated with this Mystery and decisions must take this Mystery into account. This view believes we are spiritual beings twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In the Christian tradition decision-making and discernment are spiritual activities in themselves, regardless of the purposes for which they are being exercised.

In the Christian tradition the fundamental issues of balance, ethics, deep meaning and enduring security occur within the context of Mystery. In the Christian understanding God is active, creating, forming and sustaining a relationship with humans through Jesus Christ and through the community of his followers. The tradition acknowledges the innate dignity of each person (while at the same time recognizing the human penchant for making something other than God the bedrock of our lives). A few further points can draw out the uniquely Christian aspects of discernment.

Discernment may be looked at through the lens of the individual or the institution. Questions of personal identity may be postponed, subsumed under a struggle for survival or otherwise kept from our conscious attention, but when they surface, they set the primary personal discernment agenda: Who am I? Where am I going? What am I to do? How do I make sense of life, of my life? What will I leave behind as my inheritance to the next generation? These are all discernment questions. Institutions, too, must answer to a version of these identity questions: Why is this institution in existence? For what purpose was it founded (shall I/we found it?) Does it still serve that purpose, or has it strayed from it? In the areas it has strayed, how can it (or can it) be called back to its divine purpose? What does the institution leave behind as its inheritance? What goods or services does it contribute? At what cost is this done? Who pays and who gains?

Consequently, in the Christian tradition institutions, as human creations, are in a very real sense also divine creations (Rahner 1975b). God wills them to exist for a purpose, sustains the vocations of those who create them, and calls others to challenge them to live out their deepest purpose and overcome the inevitable destructive tendencies that also become institutionalized along with their God-given purpose (Wink, 1998). An important aspect of discernment of institutions and of their leaders consists in identifying the God-endowed and life-giving vocation of the institution; once this deep purpose in God's plan of creation has been identified, it functions as a plumb-line to ground subsequent discernment for the institution and its

leadership. It also functions as a touchstone for evaluating potential and actual decisions: does this action enhance the purpose of our institution as God understands it?

[In the prologue critical incident, Jerry appeals to the vocation of *Healthhelp* as a means of guiding his own interventions, but also to help the managers and clinical leaders come to a discerned decision about where and how to relocate the southeast headquarters. When the decision process has been completed, Jerry evaluates and compliments the leaders on the new possibilities for *Healthhelp* to enhance its mission to serve the urban poor.]

Ultimately, discernment is about freedom, freedom to be the best one can possibly be. Through the process of self-realization and choice one forges a life of freedom both for himself or herself (Rahner, 1974, 1975a, 1975b). In like fashion, in the organization context, discernment can allow organizational participants to find the freedom to guide organization development to enable the organization to reach its fullest potential in serving the needs of society.

[Jerry's freedom in guiding Healthhelp was particularly evident to his senior Vice President, who seeks to understand the source of the freedom.]

Human freedom is the touchstone of Christian discernment. In the discernment tradition, however, human freedom is very different than the ability to do what one wants, constrained only by other individuals' parallel rights to their own unfettered action. Rather, human freedom is the graced ability to actualize one's full development as a uniquely created human person, to continually develop one's God-given abilities and gifts and gradually shed the narrow, crabbed and hurtful aspects of oneself and one's relationships with one's various communities. In like manner, through discernment organizations find freedom and courage to serve more important needs through innovative action.

In the Christian scriptures Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:16-21) describes human freedom by drawing a well-known contrast between unfreedom and freedom. As examples of lack of freedom, Paul cites fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness. To this list we might add greed, selfishness, addictions and any other "smallness of spirit." His examples of freedom include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control; we might add energy for life, creativity, care for the next generation and of the earth, enjoyment of beauty, sense of humor and other expressions of "expansiveness of spirit." He summarizes: "For you were called to freedom, brothers, only do not use our freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (Gal 5:13). This understanding of freedom comprises the baseline and norm for all discernment.

The implications of this position are enormous. It means that the reach of discernment goes far beyond what we ordinarily think of as "religious" or even "spiritual." It means that God's will is the flourishing of all creation, including each individual person. It allows one to ask: "What will lead to greater flourishing for not only myself, but for others involved in this situation?" And for the organization, it asks how the organization might likewise flourish in its service to its multiple stakeholders.

With this introduction to the Christian discernment tradition, we turn our attention to a perspective on contemporary strategic decision-making.

## **Section Two**

### **AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING**

In this discussion of discernment/decision making we will focus on strategic decision making. Managers moving from a technical area, such as accounting or engineering, to responsibilities in upper management are often confronted for the first time with strategic decisions. Not surprisingly, there is a big temptation to export what has been learned from making technical and managerial decisions to strategic ones. It is important to note that managers even when making non-strategic decisions have less than a sterling track

record. More than half of these decisions fail: hardly a basis to continue, let alone export these practices (Nutt, 1999).

By examining typical pitfalls which contemporary decision theory show to entrap managers, we will set the stage for reviewing normative guidelines for strategic decision making. But first a word regarding the character of strategic decisions.

### **The nature of strategic decisions**

Strategic decisions are often developmental. A developmental decision requires a vision for the core businesses of an organization or its key business practices. The vision often suggests radical changes in products/services, customers/clients, markets, service or distribution channels, alliances, sources of revenue, collaborative or competitive advantage, sources of revenue, skills, ways to organize, or persona or image that can be integrated with core competencies of the organization (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; Nutt and Backoff, 1997). Such decisions call for new businesses or business practices that lack precedent. The novelty requires innovation (new to the organization) or even radical innovation (new to the industry) that can tax a decision-maker's intuition and creative capacities. This kind of decision can also arise in response with cutting edge technology. Such decisions can provoke tensions that pull the organization in different directions. (Consider the frequently encountered tension to cut cost which increasing quality or service offerings).

Thompson (1967) calls developmental decisions "inspirational" because both ends and means must be discovered. Both purpose and action must be identified before such a decision can be made. Ackoff (1981) finds such a decision to be prompted by "wicked problems" that have complex interconnections that cause unexpected feedback with surprising consequences. The resulting situation becomes "unstructured" or a "mess" (Mitroff and Emshoff, 1979). The lack of clues in where to begin and the complexity of the situation present considerable ambiguity and are a real challenge to sort out. When things are in flux because the strategy is not working, but has yet to be fixed, the challenge is heightened by crisis, when time frames get very short. Decision-making in such situations must depart from bounded rationality (March and Simon, 1958), negotiation (Lindblom, 1965), goal setting (Locke, et al, 1991), and other time-honored approaches tailored for the non-developmental decision to be successful.

In contrast, non-strategic decisions have less ambiguity. The organization's strategy is not in flux and can be used to provide premises that frame what needs to be done to make a decision. Decision premises Thompson's ends and means are knowable (Thompson, 1967) or can be inferred from the current context. Such a decision can be complex and important, but still are not strategic in the sense we are considering here.

Confusion regarding the character of strategic decisions stems from a failure to clarify distinctions made in this field of study early on. For some time researchers followed the lead of Mintzberg et al (1976) and Hickson et al (1986) and referred to decisions as strategic if they seemed important and had long-term implications. For our purposes in this paper, strategic decisions are those in which both ends and means are initially unknown.

[ In our prologue critical incident, John Burnham, the regional Vice President of *Healthhelp* was treating the relocation of the southeast headquarters to Atlanta as a non-strategic decision challenge. He thought all the variables were obvious and identifiable, and the decision self-evident. While several clues suggested that this decision could be seen as strategic, he did not want to risk opening the decision to broader exploration lest key personnel "jump ship." The interventions of his CEO, Jerry, opened the decision to those affected so that they could examine both ends (dimensions of *Healthhelp's* mission, and creative new means to reshape the relocation analysis.)

### **Section Three**

## TYPICAL CAUSES OF DECISION PROCESS FAILURE

As mentioned earlier, research shows that more than half of the decisions made in American companies fail (Nutt, 1999). The expected benefits of a decision choice are not realized, or even worse, many implementations are not even attempted. The startling rate of failure prompts many questions. Why is failure so prevalent? What are its causes? What can be done to reduce it? Answers to these questions have come in uncovering the blunders that decision-makers are prone to make (Nutt 2001). They are:

Premature commitments.  
Investing in the wrong things,  
Using failure-prone decision-making practices.

The rush to judgment, poor allocation, and bad practice blunders crop up again and again in studies of organizational decisions. Poor decision practices create traps that ensnare the unsuspecting leader. Let us consider often-cited causes of failure.

### Premature Commitments

Leaders blunder when they make premature commitments (Bazerman, 1994). Decision-makers frequently jump on the first idea proposed and then spend extensive time trying to make it work. This rush to judgement creates a commitment that is hard to back away from. Such precipitous choice often flows from the loneliness one feels when grappling with a tough decision and the longing to meet one's responsibilities. Complex problems can elicit fear. Self-gratification is achieved by action, sometimes amplified by ego, lust for power, and greed. Such barely conscious drives prohibit decision-makers from stepping into the unknown and remain there until true insight can emerge. Psychological time pressure seems to mount. Consequently, decision-makers take short cuts. Search for good ideas is set aside replaced by homilies such as: "why rediscover the wheel when someone has done it for us." An artificial urgency is then often admonished: "Let's get on with it." Because the focus on initial ideation is abbreviated, unanticipated delays emerge from a poor action path. Endless retrofits are and redesigns are required. The leader tries to cover the problem by trying to convince stakeholders that all this additional action is an attempt to serve their interests, rather than a mistake caused by the behavior of the decision-maker.

### Overemphasis on analytic evaluations

Narrowly focused analytic evaluations often capture too much of organizations' time and money. Such analytic evaluations are often defensive in nature; carried out to justify an idea that a leader has become wedded to. People develop intuitions that there are neglected problem elements. More analysis is required to defend the preemptive choice. Managers spend vast sums on defending the benefits of a proposed action, but make no new investments in the search for new ideas.

### Over-reliance on past failure prone practices

Leaders use failure-prone practices over and over again and seem oblivious to their poor track record. This repetition of prior decision approaches stems from misleading associations of past decisions and their outcomes. Prior good decision-making practice appropriate in one period of time does not necessarily guarantee future success. Changed circumstances (i.e. unexpected increases in fuel prices, new weather patterns) can be simply ascribed to bad luck. Lacking information, managers make misleading associations between a prior decision-making practice and results.

These blunders of rushing to judgment, over-emphasis on narrowly focused analysis, and over reliance on past failure-prone practices in turn lead to five process-related traps that can ambush the unsuspecting leader.

#### 1. Over-responding to selected claimants

People inside and outside of an organization reacting to warning signs and signals, note concerns that seem to be important, and make claims (Toulman, 1979). Falling market share, for example, may alarm a board member. The board member notes his concern and makes a claim about the market share decline, such as calling for improved quality in existing products. Decision-makers get trapped when they prematurely buy into a claim without seeking input from other informed people. Managers often choose among the claims and claimants by adopting the interpretation of events that seems to be most logical, consistent with their own views, or supported by powerful people they must cater to (Cyert and March, 1963). Disagreements take shape when claimants fail to share the concerns that have prompted the adopted claim. This can prompt others such as concerned insiders, skeptics, and people who have something to lose to take defensive action. Leaders thus get trapped when they fail to take the time to identify the concerns of other stakeholders.

## 2. Underestimating the Barriers to Action

Decisions are valueless unless put to use. Implementation calls careful management of social and political forces that are set in motion by a decision to realize its use. Taking steps to uncover the interests and commitments of key people pays dividends. Left unmanaged, social and political concerns of key people can take on a life of their own. Ignoring this is a common trap that often leads to failure.

Two error-filled practices are widely used. Both are cheap and fast but are also failure-prone. Many spend little time on consensus building but rather quickly move toward a preferred course of action. Managers then apply power by using an edict. To tell people what to do a memo is written, someone is hired, or training is begun. Edicts are apt to fail for two reasons. First, people who believe they can be disadvantaged are flushed out and enticed to fight back. If the disadvantaged lack the power openly to oppose, they resort to passive tactics of tokenism, tacit resistance, or obstruction (Bardack, 1977). Second, people that have no interest in a decision are prompted to resist because they fear that yielding to force will set a bad precedent. Edicts are apt to prompt a power struggle in which the best outcome one can hope for is indifference in which people do not care enough to resist (DePree, 1992).

If an edict fails, decision-makers often resort to persuasion (Churchman, 1979) now trying to “explain” why an action is needed. Persuasion is fouled by the previous power play, which often dooms it to failure. Selling an idea with a demonstration of its value or with the logic of its proposed action is limited by the extent to which people are indifferent to what the manager wants to do. It has little effect on people with something to lose. Nevertheless, edicts and persuasion, used singly or in tandem, are used in two of every three non-developmental decisions.

## 3. Prematurely Setting a Direction

Decision-makers are often unwilling to acknowledge a concern without having an immediate solution (Nutt, 1993). These leaders are seldom open to surprise and learning about possibilities. The need for control makes them unwilling to admit doubt. Doubt can be a powerful force pushing the leader to think more deeply and search more aggressively for ideas. Nevertheless, rapid action is universally preferred over this, prompting a rush to judgment and the trap of ambiguous directions. As a result, the most common way of establishing a direction is with an idea. Leaders find what seems to be a useful idea and fashion it into a ready-made solution.

Beginning with an idea limits the focus of inquiry to a single solution. Leaders see the idea as a pragmatic way to take decisive action, and make no effort to find another option. Decisiveness quickly manages possible threats that could spin out of control. Speedy action is then favored, even in situations that have no real time pressure. However, managers using an idea direction often struggle to verify the virtues of their idea, to coax support from others, and have to repeatedly modify the idea to make it workable. Commitment becomes a trap that often produces failure. Indeed, solutions derived in this way are seldom successful. Leaders become trapped by perceptions of sunk cost, perceived threats in admitting failure, and by the reluctance people have to starting over (Nutt, 1999).

#### 4. Insufficient Search and Innovation

Search and innovation is often waylaid by traps found in the desire for a quick fix and the lure of current business practices. Being caught in these traps often leads to a failed decision. People with vested interests in organizations continually look for opportunities to push their ideas. Decision-makers feeling pressure to get out of a potentially bad situation often grab onto such an idea. The pressure to act rapidly draws decision-makers to the “conspicuous solutions” found in peoples pet ideas (Cyert and March, 1963). The quick fix that results is hard to back away from. Also, many people don't know what they want until they see what they can get (Wildavsky. 1979). Having an answer eliminates this ambiguity but also keeps a decision-maker from finding other, as yet undiscovered ideas, that could be better. A quick-fix mentality makes it difficult for decision-makers to find innovative options or even an additional option when innovation and multiple options are universally recommended.

Decision-makers who avoid a quick fix are confronted with another challenge: the lure of current practices. It is difficult to move away from the tangible to the unknown when fast action and low cost are stressed and solution quality made to seem unimportant. In the failures, many of the proposed actions were variations on current practices. Managers also avoid the question of search by going on a site visit to find out what others are doing. A sister organization is visited and their business practices are copied to provide a workable, if not an ideal solution. This strategy is followed because people believe that the equivalent of a field test has been conducted by the other organization so the practice must have value. Adopting the business practices of others is thought to reduce decision-making time and cost and provide a workable, if not innovative, solution. This solution can work when the other company's circumstances are similar. When the companies lack compatibility, a retrofit is needed and costs will quickly escalate. These costs are almost always underestimated, as is the time to do the required tailoring. Decision-makers drawn to seeing "how others do it" are also pulled away from innovation and search. Using good search tactics and designing custom made plans avoids the traps prompted by the quick fix and the lure of current practices.

#### 5. Misusing Analysis

Once a conspicuous solution is found, analysis soon follows. Decision-makers often feel they must take a defensive posture at his point, attempting to justify a favored course of action. After all is said and done, more time and money is spent doing this type of analysis than any of the other steps discussed thus far. Analysis without being clear about expected results is misleading or, even worse, meaningless. Analysis is meaningless when it concentrates on things like costs when the decision should have had other expectations. Cost driven analysis is misleading and tends to find what one expects to find, offering shallow and predictable results (Rasmusson and Batstone, 1991). The money spent on defending such ideas with defensive evaluations could have been better spent on finding new ones.

Obviously contemporary decision theory shares with the discernment tradition the concern for a search for wiser approaches when the organizational leader is faced with strategic decision challenges.

### **Section Four INTEGRATING DISCERNMENT WITH A DECISION MAKING PROCESS**

Having provided background underlying Christian discernment, and having examined contemporary strategic decision failures, we now undertake the challenge of juxtaposing the two approaches to strategic decisions into an integrated process model. We acknowledge in doing so that both decision and discernment practices vary. So we are necessarily generalizing, providing an outline or skeleton around which a process would need to be constructed suited to the persons facing the challenge and the particular organization setting. Further, although the normative model is cast as a step-process guide, it is well understood in both literatures that the process is non-linear and can even be circular with feed-forward and feedback that get activated as new considerations arise. It might be more useful to conceive of the following outline as a set of elements, rather than a sequential process. However, with these caveats, we

believe it is instructional to set forth the elements (with some sensitivity to sequence) as illustrative of how the two traditions complement each other.

### **1) Entering The Decision Process With A Reflective Inner Disposition**

#### *The discernment tradition*

In the Christian Tradition discernment is a “spiritual habit” developed through regular prayer and contemplative practice. Discernment involves coming to a new kind of freedom in one's choices when approaching the process of decision-making. Or, in more theological language, answering the call of God in the situation one finds surrounding a decision: freedom that detaches from fear, anxiety, and opportunism.

This foundational disposition, a prelude to the entire process, is neither automatic nor particularly easy. In fact, the tradition insists that this intention--to grow in inner liberty as one follows one's vocation--comes as a gift to us from God's Holy Spirit. Highly developed discernment is a wisdom gift to ask for in prayer. Indeed, it often requires some level of inner conversion to receive the grace to pause and reflect drawing on inner resources.

Most of the time, it is easier to slide right past this step, preferring pragmatism to a potentially costly conversion that can call into question long-standing practices and commitments. But failing to pause here, failing to ask for the inner disposition of openness to all that might be revealed, and wisdom to assess against this norm of greater inner freedom as one enters the decision process can readily empty discernment of its meaning. One may get a decision made, but by-pass the essentials of discernment, and thereby miss the invitation to greater inner freedom and the insights that this can offer. Consequently, within the Christian tradition, discernment is understood more as a whole attitude toward and way of life rather than a technique to pull out only at a particular point in time when a strategic decision must be made. Discernment flourishes in a context of regular spiritual practice, a growing contemplative spirit, a community of accountability and support, and what the tradition has called "indifference."

Indifference” in the tradition does not mean that one is uninterested in the outcome or in some way apathetic. Indeed it is quite the opposite. “Indifference” means becoming fully committed to a new freedom. This freedom allows one to choose to follow God's call, to be willing to let go of all other preferences and outcomes. In short discernment requires that we are willing to forfeit any short-range or less-than-free solution that relieves the tension, settles the chaos, makes a decision, moves to action, makes oneself feel good, enhances the bottom line, "gets someone off your back," or select any of the myriad subtle ways that we often settle for less than true freedom in our decisions. Such dysfunctional behavior undermines the intentionality upon which discernment rests. The false self amplifies anxiety and fear and perverts by greed and the desire for power. Thus the importance of prayer and contemplation (meditation) as a means to mute the false self. When this occurs the leader is able to live in a world of truth with a desire to serve selflessly.

This basic intentionality to choose God's will is the *sine qua non* for discernment. It is so important that it should permeate all later aspects of the decision making process. When one loses this disposition, or at least the desire for it, the process should pause. The basic disposition must then be reestablished through spiritual disciplines.

[In our critical incident, Jerry displays these foundational dispositions: He has an established spiritual practice employing classical spiritual disciplines, and its fruit is becoming evident to those close to him. He takes seriously the notion of vocation, seeking not only how God is calling him in his personal life, but also how God is calling him to respond as a leader of an organization. He regularly brings difficult business and organizational situations to prayer, seeking to dispose himself in openness to new ideas that can lead *Healthhelp* to better fulfill its mission. In that continual disposition of prayerful openness, what the discernment tradition calls “indifference,” Jerry is able to notice misfits between the process as it unfolds and his inner beacon. These

insights prompt him to attend more carefully to the situation, and to return more intentionally to prayer as the complexities of the situation unfold.

*Healthhelp*, too, manifests a necessary quality for good discernment. The organization has a clear mission in which service to the poor and disadvantaged play an important part. The mission has been owned by both the clinical and administrative leaders and serves as a guide several times during the decision to move the headquarters, pointing both forward to a solution that more deeply embodies the mission, and backward to the fruit of the decision once made.]

### *The strategic decision making tradition*

There are echoes of this “freedom” to discover truth without distortion in the decision process guidelines that follow, and in the literature on effective transformational leadership. This literature suggests that the willingness to remain open, to listen to multiple stakeholders, to avoid precipitous action and delay gratification requires a high level of personal integration (Gardner 1995). Unfortunately, these insights contained in the managerial literature dealing with transformational leadership, dysfunctional leader behavior, leadership integrity and so on, are often not included as a critical prelude to the decision process that focuses more typically on instrumental action. Yet the decision process is ultimately a human process. The failed decision choices discussed earlier are often driven by behavioral characteristics of the leader. So relative to this first step, the *discernment* tradition reminds us of an overarching spiritual orientation, and reflective behavior sometimes under attended in decision models.

## **2) Patience in the discovery of the underlying nature of the decision issue.**

### *The discernment tradition*

This point addresses the need for clarity about a decision’s “arena of action”, or what the decision is really about (Nutt, 2002). When the arena and thus the issues to be attended to are cut and dried, the matter for discernment is obvious. But many decisions involve issues with a number of complex interdependent variables so that time and energy must go into isolating and then understanding their interconnected and complex relationships. Often the first attempt at stating the matter for discernment or arena of action proves inadequate, and another formulation must be attempted. Sometimes, the deeper questions or issues do not emerge until one is further into the process. Thus in the discernment tradition, it is particularly important to renew one’s inner disposition and desire for detachment from personal preferences which might distort truth as new information is received, and new voices heard.

The tradition suggests there is a way of “being in” the decision which is important. The posture is one of “indifference”. (One thinks of the wonderful Buddhist phrase: “The Beginners Mind”). One must be present with no screening out of messages. Further, this calls for reverent listening. The tradition speaks of being attentive to emerging deep feelings. These are not transient emotions or anxieties, but rather the deep and persistent inner voice of truth. The tradition speaks of the need to hold these feelings in the heart in watchful waiting, and the need to bring these feelings to prayer and contemplative silence without undue anxiety.

### *The decision making tradition.*

Given the earlier discussion of managerial failures, there is obvious resonance with the need for patience in the strategic decision literature.

Managers processing developmental decisions that change their business or business practices are called on to make sense of possibilities (Weick, 1979). They must envision these possibilities as a place to start and infer purpose from the idea and its implications. The idea and its purpose are uncovered together with multiple stakeholders in the organization. The role of the manager changes from one of directing to one of

leading exploratory dialog through involvement and facilitation, decreasing the emphasis on direction and control.

The earliest stages of such decision making emphasizes scouting for ideas externally, hosting retreats or offsites which invite creative ideation, and utilizing forums in safe environments for idea exchange. The overarching prescription is to remain in the problem nexus and not to proceed prematurely to solution development (Delbecq, 1998; March and Simon, 1958).

There are also clear parallels in the decision literature dealing with “visioning.” Managers are counseled to listen to all voices. This must include the oftentimes uncomfortable voices that are discussing the obstacles to be encountered when preliminary strategic direction is offered. This literature emphasizes over and over that each move to “walk the vision” must also “walk the talk” with stakeholders. It suggests an approach that parses this important step into sub-processes including sharing in visioning, exploring the situation, and uncovering barriers (Schendel and Hofer, 1979; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Pettigrew, 1985; Delbecq, 1994; Conger, 1991). Although familiar territory to the contemporary manager who has studied decision processes, it is worth taking a moment to recall some admonitions offered in this rich literature relating to establishing “vision” as part of strategic decision making.

Leaders must be not only be willing to listen to and deal with stakeholders, but are counseled to pay particular attention to stakeholders that can obstruct a developmental decision. To be successful, a leader has but two choices. He or she can attempt to win over these stakeholders and get them to be active supporters of needed changes. Peoples’ resistance to change poses a formidable barrier to developmental action. Those that are reluctant to experiment and to take risks can be sweep along when involved in the process of change (Hackman, 1990). Or the leader can move the stakeholders to a neutral position so they will stay out of the sensitive negotiations needed to be successful.

The decision literature suggests a number of actions that can help in this process of co- creating a vision:

Asking stakeholder groups that matter to voice their concerns, and utilizing structured techniques such as Nominal Groups, Focus Groups, and so on, to help frame issues. (Delbecq and Van de Ven, 1971)

Creating a task force of “exemplary followers” to help diagnose and frame problems with the leader (Kelly, 1992)

Best of all, involving as many impacted participants as possible in forums to help uncover subtle parameters of the issue.

The aim is to evolve a vision which has compelling imagery, that begins to uncover innovative ways to deal with the issue, which recognizes and taps on tradition and organizational values, and connects to actions people can and are willing to explore to realize change (Thompson and Strickland, 1995; Wheatley, 1992; Wall, 1992; Nutt and Backoff, 1992; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Gardner, 1990; Quinn, 1988).

The literature on this early “visioning” phase of strategic decision making find that such a process takes time, must build on dialog, needs to integrate or negotiate differences, and seeks to uncover hidden obstacles. The process must include individuals that can effect (or block) the unfolding of the vision.

Key uses and consequences of a vision a creation of focus (Nanus, 1989), an ideal image of future (Kouzes and Posner, 1987), a conceptual road map (Bryman, 1992), future organizational purpose; (Land and Jarman, 1992), a new order (Kelley, 1992), and principles and values that direct (Gardner, 1990; Nadler et al., 1992). Such vision provides a vivid and reachable target that beckons. The picture has fresh ideas that inspire and builds a commitment to change in the minds of key people.

The effort to discover, refine, and gain cooperation with a new vision is often understated. Visioning requires a complex process that requires patience, openness and willingness to delay precipitous action parallel to the norms in the discernment tradition.

[Jerry's initial interventions serve to open up the options around *Healthhelp's* potential move. Are those affected sufficiently involved in decisions affecting them? Are people being given sufficient notice and help with transition issues? Is the location actually the best, and by whose standards? These moves complicate the process set in motion by John Burnham, evoking initial resistance on his part. Always Jerry seeks to build up the participants and simultaneously uphold the authority of the regional vice president, but without stifling the necessary conflict and difference of opinion. The effort to refine the issues and involve the managerial and clinical leaders more significantly in the process leads to important new data—and to new questions. The clinical and managerial leaders are becoming crucial players in the framing of the decision, and, though the process becomes much messier, the outcome can potentially claim high commitment from those leaders. The additional time and lack of closure, however, tempt the organization's leaders to short-cut the process. The discernment tradition, like transformative leadership, asks the decision-makers to hold the decision open far into the process of data gathering and weighing the options. Jerry wisely proposes a "light-handed" way for all to touch back into the grounding vision, calming and anchoring the next steps of the process.]

### **3) Undertaking the hard and time consuming work of gathering information.**

As the vision gains traction, the effort turns to the identification of "means" or a solution path compatible with the vision.

#### *The discernment tradition*

This component seems self evident. Yet all too frequently discernment efforts suffer from lack of appropriate and accurate information which compromise the effectiveness of the process. Such information and relevant data is critical because it can lead to a reconsideration of the matter for discernment itself (or arena of action as decision theory calls it). Often through such information and data it becomes clear that the heart of the matter is not where one originally thought it lay. Gathering the necessary data is often hard work, expensive, time-consuming and frequently inconvenient. Nor does it seem particularly "spiritual." As a result this step is sometimes a weaker element in this older tradition. Those given to the theological position that God will enlighten them despite their unwillingness to do the necessary data gathering are particularly prone to omit this step.

#### *The decision - making tradition*

While this is a weaker element in terms of prescriptive richness in the older discernment tradition, it is a area of strength in contemporary decision theory.

There are of course, new tools of mathematical modeling and financial analysis. However, when one is dealing with a yet to be discovered solutions, except in late stages of scenario analysis, more qualitative tools are more helpful. It is impossible to catalog all the tactical resources for information gathering, sharing, and aggregating judgments in this brief paper. Instead we will sample just four examples of the riches of contemporary decision theory for this phase of the decision process by looking at: benchmarking, protocols for reconciling differentiated concerns, and approaches to sharing power.

#### Benchmarking

As pointed out earlier, managers often benchmark practices used by respected organizations to uncover solutions. Practices that seem desirable are exported to meet an objective or the needs suggested by a claim. Managers use a "single benchmark" when they copy the practices of a single organization or work unit and tailor these practices to fit their needs. In addition to "hiring a solution," single benchmarks are derived from site visits made managers and from descriptions published in periodicals and books.

Managers who use single benchmarks often spend considerable time trying to make the idea work, as they did when a solution is imposed at the outset. Failures arise when the transported idea must be modified to fit the needs of its new user. The single benchmark provides a solution often selected in haste, with little reflection, and then requires considerable tailoring later on to get it to work. Resources are mobilized to justify the solution, which kept the people in the organization from looking into other possibilities. A more sophisticated approach, called "integrated benchmarking" works much better. To use integrated benchmarking the practices of several organizations or work groups are examined, identifying the best features from each. An amalgamation of these practices produces the solution.

Search aids are a related technique. Managers might utilize a request for proposal, or RFP, to find prepackaged solutions from vendors or consultants can be effective. Search efforts can be either single or multiple. Managers who feel that they are aware of standards by which to judge a proposed option carry out a single search. For a multiple search, the manager searches repeatedly to learn about what is available that can be useful. Several competing proposals are accumulated and compared to discern their features and capabilities. With this knowledge, a new RFP is prepared that call for a system with features known to be available and needed by the organization. In a multiple search, each new RFP is written with these new insights so choosing is deferred until learning is completed. This type of search is very effective. Single searches open up the search process but allow less opportunity for learning. The investment in a multiple search pays dividends. Time is saved because fewer repairs are necessary to fix solutions gone awry.

### Stimulating Innovation

In some cases, there may be no solution to adopt and modify from external sources, requiring leaders to undertake the search for innovation. This is a particularly difficult challenge, as innovation demands a process that facilitates creativity. Treatment of the complex subject of innovation in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, but a reminder of the difficult path up the innovation slope is worth noting in this context.

The innovation literature identifies three key leader interventions at the early stages of ideation: 1) creating a protected work space or environment for those grappling with innovation (Stein 1975, Goldberg, 1983, Behn, 1991); 2) finding people with creative passion to participate in the effort, ( Stein, 1974, Gordon, 1971, de Bono, 1990 Nutt, 1989, Kelley 1992); and 3) legitimizing speculation about new possibilities by allowing criticism of current practices being followed by the organization.

Time for idea incubation is required to uncover new ideas. Creativity aids should be used to maintain a problem focus. Decades of research show that innovative ideas are more apt to surface when incubation is facilitated, people are encourage to search for new ideas, premature evaluation is avoided, and many ideas are uncovered.

### Reconciling Differentiated Concerns.

Earlier we emphasized that different people, inside and outside the organization, react differently to a strategic challenge. As the decision process proceeds to explore potential solutions, reconciling these concerns becomes important. Smoothing over different concerns or forcing a solution that alienates particular constituents leads to active or passive resistance. Contemporary decision theory offers many useful protocols for addressing this concern.

For example, managers can be asked to voice their concerns, and the logic behind them. Investing a few hours to poll each group of stakeholders, using a structured group process like the Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq and Van de Ven, 1971), conducting focus groups or utilizing Delphi surveys (Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson, 1971). Through such structured processes for aggregating judgments and reconciling priorities, comparisons of claims and their motivating concerns across the stakeholder groups are uncovered. The manager looks for an arena that will be acceptable to most, if not all, stakeholders. This process allows the manager to champion action by taking charge and legitimizing the effort. People who are consulted and shown that the decision-making effort is important are more likely to

be supportive. With this information, significant players can be shown the importance of taking action. Key players that support the arguments for action will spread the word to others; making momentum is easier to maintain.

Sometimes the process will have to pause while negotiation is undertaken to deal with deep seated differences (Delbecq, 1994). The critical point is that giving voice to concerns regarding solution paths and reconciling these differences is a critical aspect of a contemporary process for implementing strategic decisions.

#### Sharing power in the evolution of solutions:

Teams can be created and given the prerogative to make the decision in areas that effect their domains (Mintzberg, et al, 1976). People are more apt to disclose their interests in such an arrangement. Even when disclosure is limited, the act of negotiating a solution promotes ownership in the agreed upon plan that makes success likely (Hackman, 1990). Savvy managers use participation because it increases their chance of success. To do this, managers create a task force with key individuals as members and delegate important aspects of a decision-making effort to the task force. Participation is used in less than one of five of their decisions, but it is very effective (Nutt, 1986; 1997). Managers say they are aware of the effectiveness of participation but find it difficult to use because of its time requirements and the seeming loss of control that results. An explanation can be found in the “paradox of control.” Managers that give up control through participation actually get more control. People are more apt to ask for help when they need it and more apt to be candid about barriers to action when asked to participate in the decision-making effort. Unilateral action closes off this type of information.

Participation effectiveness varies with the degree of involvement and the role of the participants. When a few people affected by the decision are given limited involvement, token participation results. Only a subset of the affected individuals are consulted and given little to do. Delegated participation also limits the involvement of stakeholders, but asks the task force to do something important, such as offering a solution. Managers who use complete participation involve all the stakeholders as members of a task force and call on the group to comment on some aspect of a decision. Comprehensive participation requires that all stakeholders be involved in all aspects of the decision.

Delegated participation is often used, token and complete participation is rarely used, and comprehensive participation is almost never used. Managers seem to be unaware that token and delegated participation have lower rates of success than does complete participation. When task force members are given an important assignment, success is more likely. *Complete participation while rarely employed leads to decisions that are adopted in almost all cases.* As the proportion of participants to all affected parties falls, the failure rate for participation increases. The power of co-optation, enticing people who participate to go along, is difficult to export. A few enthusiastic participants are unable to sway people who have vested interests or are suspicious about the manager’s motives.

Another approach open to the decision-maker in such a situation is to network with concerned stakeholders to demonstrate the necessity of acting, which is called intervention (Nutt, 1986). Intervention is done by showing key people information about current performance and performance norms to indicate the importance of taking action, collecting and managing interests as they go. People are more likely to be supportive when this networking makes them aware of performance shortfalls and what level of performance is possible. This rarely occurs but is very successful, no matter what the manager’s organizational level. Intervention creates the need for change in the minds of key people by identifying and justifying new performance norms. Showing how a comparable organization is able to operate, for example, with lower cost creates new cost expectations, suggesting a real opportunity to make a positive change. After a solution is found, the manager intervenes again by showing how performance is improved.

To summarize, the contemporary decision making tradition has a rich panoply of protocols including all the insights relative to managing problem and solution searches and innovation design that amplify, enable, and guide the important process of gathering information relative to solutions. Particularly in the context of

organizational change, contemporary decision theory greatly strengthens the admonitions of the discernment tradition by offering specific and practical guidelines in support of this step.

[In our case, Jerry gently nudges the process, but then allows the managers, clinical leaders and the regional vice president to fully bring their skills to bear and carry out the tasks for which they were hired. Jerry's interventions are nonetheless significant. He suggested problem dimensions to investigate that might prove fruitful, provided a safe space for differences to come out into the open, mentored the leaders, provided a non-confrontational means of disarming the "race card," and held the process and its participants in prayer. All these actions demonstrate processes that serve to enhance the discerned decision.]

#### **4) Reflection and prayer.**

##### *The discernment tradition*

As stated earlier, in the Christian tradition the context of discernment is always relationship between the person doing the deciding and the Mystery called God. The communication in this relationship is called prayer. We understand this prayer to be back and forth, to and from, dialogical, user-friendly. Careful attention in set-aside times for reflection allows this communication to emerge clearly and specifically.

In the midst of all the complex feedback processes involved in visioning and information gathering, confronting confirming and non-confirming data, tensions between well meaning stakeholders, needs for constant adjustment to perception and action, inconvenience, and the required delayed gratification, some anchor is needed to maintain one's center. In addition, to hold to "truth" during these processes when at times fear and anxiety, cynicism and burnout, uncertainty and risk tempt one to shortcut the process or impose self preferred action is seen in the tradition as requiring prayer. All these external tensions and the temptations of the false self requires that the leader have some way to rest in "unknowing." In the tradition the means to remain centered, at peace with "unknowing," and also to be mindfully and fully present and open to the unfolding of truth is prayer and particularly contemplative (meditation) practice. Through contemplation the leader is able to "see" the truth without any subjective distortion or interpretation. He or she is able to suspend all personal agendas in the situation under consideration and enter a type of stillness to quiet the mind so that the real can be seen. It is a long, loving look at the real (Burghardt, 1989).

"Truth" here is not a vision or cognitive specificity. God is Mystery, and prayer/contemplative practice does not mean bullying God into special self-aggrandizing insight. It is not a promise of "technical" solutions, or secret knowledge that eliminates uncertainty or suffering from the process. Discernment rather gives us a sense we are proceeding in the right direction, and that "God is with us," sharing gifts of peace, love and joy even in the difficult discovery process. It is "directional" insight at a different plane than technical solution (Mueller 1996; Houdek 1996).

A key guide to sensing the "rightness" of direction in the Ignatian Spirituality is attention to "consolation" and "desolation." If there is a sense of increased freedom, inner peace, a sense of an increased capacity of goodness following prayer and action, then this consolation suggests a directional correctness. If, by contrast, there is agitation, anxiety, fear, a diminishment of peace, there is desolation. In the tradition, paying attention to these inner affective movements is important.

[ In our critical incident Jerry notices when things "rest uneasily in his stomach" or when they settle into a "rightness." But he also notices when trust seems growing in the group, when anxiety seems about to short circuit the process, and when everything seems to come together among the decision-makers. He constantly juxtaposes his inner sense of "consolation" and "desolation" with the behavioral clues in others about how the process is proceeding.]

Prayer and reflection also enables the leader to reverently listen to the voices of others so that the “truth” which they possess, flowing from their “charism” (talents and gifts, wisdom and insight, local knowledge) can be heard and integrated into the path chosen.

#### *The decision making tradition*

The practice of reflection and prayer finds resonance in the conceptualization of “incubation” in creative decision theory. Yet resting in quiet and prudent non-action while continued problem and solution exploration is undertaken is not an emphasis in popular writing regarding decision making. Further, the contemporary ideology of “speed” has increasingly diminished the willingness of many leaders to follow minimal contemporary “best practices” in allowing decision processes to unfold with full participation. The earlier cited causes of failure illustrated the dangers of short cuts taken because of perceived “time pressure.” If contemporary decision theory has many gifts to provide relative to information search protocols, it has failed to convince many leaders of the value of reflective centering.

To be sure, the literature on creative problem solving speaks of paying attention to intuition, and of emotional intelligence. The literature dealing with stress and burnout speaks to the value of periods of reflection, pauses before returning to intensive activity, and the need of rest and renewal (Delbecq and Friedlander, 1995). Thus, the discernment tradition with its stress on a deeper entry into contemplative silence offers a special emphasis under attended in most managerial literature.

### **5) Tentative Decisions and Attention to Outcomes**

#### *The discernment tradition*

An important issue in the discernment tradition has to do with extent of commitment to a decision at this point in the process. The discernment tradition calls for one more step that is vitally important. One sits with the tentative decision with openness until some kind of confirmation occurs. Only then is the decision finalized.

The tradition suggests various kinds of assessments, some inner, some external. One of the most ancient and most consistently employed is Paul's “fruits of the Spirit,” a growth in Faith, Hope and Love. Sometimes these fruits are obvious to onlookers, but sometimes they are accessible only to the discerner. They can be subtle: Is this particular feeling really peace or is it relief that a decision is made and action can begin? Is this reaction patience or passivity? Is this hope or wishful thinking? It may take some time and inner work to learn to interpret such subtle signs. A spiritual advisor or director can provide invaluable help at this point, especially if she or he already knows the discerner well.

Other inner signs of confirmation include: growing inner peace, increasing energy, courage to proceed, continued or growing sense that this decision is right for this time, congruence that supports integrity, a sense of consolation, finding structures that dissipate chaos, the opportunity for an increasingly balanced life, and so on.

Various external indicators have been considered important in the discernment tradition. One such indicator is compatibility with Biblical tradition. (But the issues of which set of interpretive norms are being invoked and how literally are they being applied have vexed believers from the beginning). Others who know the discerner will sense that this decision is in keeping with his/her growing inner liberty. Instead of being put in jeopardy commitments to family, to other organizational challenges, and to new forms of servant leadership can be improved.

The discernment tradition usually offers norms with respect to individuals. But contemporary leaders must also assess whether their organizations and institutions, are structures which manifest the fruit of the Spirit. What might fruit of the Holy Spirit look like when manifested by institutions? Some of the most basic and general include greater unity based on increasing effective interdependence, increased trust, increased justice, greater mutual security, a sense of more meaningful work, progress for the most marginal, stronger

connection to core organization values and cultural roots, greater harmony (Shalom), and greater hope (Dorr, 1984).

These institutional fruits of the Spirit require brief elaboration. First, unity in this context means a deep interdependence that mutually joins all persons, stakeholders and communities. It is based not merely on an increasingly global economic order, but only one in which the economic disparity between the rich and the poor is lessened, not increased. Second, security as a structural fruit of the Spirit cannot, in the last analysis, be produced by force, pernicious competition, or by military might. This security grows in a climate of trust throughout the institutions of society and at all levels of society, where all are perceived to benefit from the social organization. Third, justice means giving all persons their due: just wage, a decent dwelling, education, access to technology, a means of livelihood, respect for one's own language and culture. Justice also calls for standards and mores of fairness to be applied in all of one's dealings. Fourth, work, as a fruit of the Spirit, refers to livelihood through meaningful labor, remunerated at a living wage. So the spiritual fruit of ordered progress should be accompanied by advances in sustainable living conditions, intellectual and cultural capital, means of livelihood, health care, adequate food production, and wiser energy consumption. Attention to culture points to respect for a sense of identity, heritage and history of people from diverse cultures linked in global organizational interdependence; local customs, languages, and religious practices are increasingly honored.

In the end, harmony, understood in the biblical sense of Shalom, is both inner peace, "at-home-ness" with self and others, and outer harmony found even amidst the struggle for economic advancement. Shalom cannot be bought at the price of enforced uniformity or as an escape from justice. Finally, hope, as a fruit of the Spirit, allows us to go forward into the unknown. This peace opens one up to creative insights. It flows from a deep sense that the Mystery we call God is in charge, and that we have to do the tasks given us to do. God will do the rest. This peace opens one up to creative insights.

These institutional fruits of the Spirit show up in concrete ways within the impacted organization and those linked in change. Outcomes such as greater inclusiveness, sharing of power and decision-making, strengthening of local communities and families, profit-sharing, lessening of hierarchies, lessening of frivolous consumption, environmental sustainability, fair and accessible grievance procedures, and so on. The list can go on.

Clearly none of these indicators, whether internal or external, individual or institutional, lead to an unambiguous judgment about the appropriateness of the decision. However, more the above indicators appear, the greater the assurance that one is moving in the right direction. Still, as noted before, discernment never leads to certitude; the process is inescapably a matter of faith in the mystery called God.

How long ought the period of seeking confirmation last? No generalization is possible; it depends on the complexity of the decision, the amount of time available and other factors peculiar to each discernment. The general assumption in the discernment tradition: In a reasonable period of time, any serious signs to reconsider should appear; in the absence of them, one should proceed with courage.

The need for a period of time for confirmation collides with the need, real or imagined, to make leadership decisions quickly and decisively. Yet it is precisely this final moment of contemplative pause that marks discernment and sets it apart from many other decision-making protocols.

### *Decision Theory*

Contemporary decision theory stresses double loop learning and evaluation. Indeed, attention to outcome evaluation is deeply embedded in the statistical quality control movement, the attention to multiple forms of data with built in signals of alarm, and the continual setting of stretch standards. Modern information system technologies accompany strategic change efforts. Still, three nuances in the discernment tradition that seem particularly contributory to decision theory.

The first is the admonition to patience. The literature on innovation failure is often associated with a tendency of move from alpha design immediately into an attempt at market penetration, without taking the

time to discover the needs of average users. Or taking the time to explore the barriers to broader implementation, such as uncovering flawed designs that are insufficiently robust to provide a compelling solution for sufficiently large group of users in order to provide market success. High performing organizations coping with strategic change and innovation are growing in their awareness of the need to co-design with users, provide greater flexibility in the architecture of solutions to fit varied market segments, and to provide extensive after market support and assistance (Delbecq and Weiss, 2000). But this awareness of “tentativeness” and “outcome assessment” is seldom internalized in organizations.

Second, there are many stories of failure due to undue haste. Superstitious overemphasis of first mover advantage and the dangers of shortcuts are exemplified in the current dot.com market bubble’s burst. A respect for patience, openness, and continued willingness to listen in order to incorporate changes connects contemporary decision theory to the discernment tradition. This is not to vitiate the importance of “action learning” or “co-design” with customers. But undue haste, technology push without attention to market pull, and premature solution design has often been the downfall of otherwise promising strategic efforts. A leader or an organization team that remains centered in the “truth” has an “inner calm. This gives each person the capacity to deal with non-confirming messages. It also keeps one open to late discovery of needed complimentary synergies allowing the time to evolve a superior solution. Leaders with such traits are able to guide their organization to be among the long run economic survivors, but also to be creative contributors of innovation products and services.

The discernment insight of a respect for and sensitivity to the holistic impact of strategic decisions on all stakeholders and interdependent communities is also noteworthy. Although “unanticipated consequences” are spoken of in theory, there is a tendency toward tunnel vision focused only on immediate instrumental outcomes, limiting managerial sensitivity to broader reactions. Law suits, frustrating regulatory legislation, opportunistic competitor action, poor media press damaging to brand integrity.....many unhappy outcomes could be avoided if early voices and warning signals were sensitively listened to by organizational leaders.

[Our case reveals important aspects of confirmation: greater collaboration, higher morale, and a new sense of commitment to mission. At the end of the incident Jerry and John are both more skilled in leading a group toward a discerned decision, and John feels well mentored, curious to learn more about how Jerry managed to remain so calm, open and undisturbed.]

## **6. Future Reevaluation**

Here both *Discernment* and *Decision Theory* share a common orientation: be open to continuous change. In the Christian discernment tradition continuous change reflects God’s continuous creation, and the Paschal mystery of Death and Resurrection. In the contemporary decision literature, openness to continual improvement and punctuated change are constant admonishments.

### **Section Five SOME SUMMARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE INSIGHTS ADDED BY THE CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT TRADITION**

Both the discernment model and contemporary decision theory emphasize a culture of engagement; the involvement of the entire organization and external stakeholders. Both emphasize the need for norms of openness and safety to enable such sharing of ideation in the creation and the evolution of a strategy. Both emphasize inclusive listening and mutual adjustment rather than secrecy, exclusion and fragmentation. Both aspire to a “higher path” of more creative and courageous outcomes. Both contain process norms intended to avoid undue haste, and reflexive moments for reexamination and listening. Both seek to incorporate the intuitive and emotional not simply the analytical. And both use processes of incubation and reflection to uncover new ways to think about the future.

The Christian discernment tradition offers several unique contributions. Most important is the tradition’s belief that the Spiritual can and should play a role a decision making process. A second contribution of the tradition is that prayer/meditative disciplines can open the leader to an inner freedom, creating a greater

openness, and release from compulsions and distortions which can manifest themselves in the behaviors that leads to strategic decision failure. In addition, the tradition offers spiritual criteria in addition to conventional instrumental criteria by which the "rightness" of a strategic direction can be tested. Attention to "spiritual criteria" allows leaders to become more holistic in their thinking, more inclusive in considering the impacts of their organizations actions, and more creative.

The tradition contends that a leader who incorporates spiritual discernment in conjunction with best practice strategic decision processes often experiences a new sense of self. This new self finds new liberty and energy in the midst complexity, finds creative inner resources to lead toward more noble goals, and finds hope that sustains courage in the face of the many obstacles which strategic change unleashes. Such leaders are able to engage in an appropriate asceticism associated with their role and do not flee from the sacrifices demanded of the servant leader. (For example, they are able to accept long hours and difficult travel associated with involving appropriate stakeholders in the decision process). The leader discovers grace is in endless supply and is continuously available to this very important leadership task. Such a leader begins to live a centered life in a paced and balanced way. In short, the leader responds to the universal call to holiness resident in the vocation of servant leadership.

Finally, the Christian tradition recognizes that spiritual discernment is exercised within many rich traditions outside Christianity, and that each tradition bringing its own special nuances to the process. It welcomes these insights. Certainly the evolution of contemporary strategic decision theory, as shown in this essay, enables and enriches the discernment tradition.

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