



THE D-WORD THAT WE ALL NEED TO KNOW AND USE

BY MICHELLE HOWIE

The problem statement almost writes itself. In an age of avalanche-level information and access to the aforementioned information, we are increasingly aware that sources are not always trustworthy. Within the challenge of source credibility, we still need to navigate information on an hourly basis.

How might we improve our skill to know, recognise or understand something, especially something that is not obvious?

Part of the answer is a D-word: Discernment.

AN INTERNAL COMPASS?

Discernment helps you find the right resource on the internet, using the right search term. Life gets tricky when you search for 'leadership training' and get 1,060,000,000 results in under one second. Like a bell ringing in the depths of our minds, discernment is the old-fashioned notification alert that cautions us, 'hang on a minute, let's slow down and think about this'.

Discernment helps us sift and sort, categorise and conclude. It's a lifesaver – and we can (and do) develop this skill in all areas of our lives. How else do we comprehend over one billion search results on Google? How else do we interpret first impressions and 'gut feel' in our human interactions? Discernment is at play in every one of us, to varying degrees.

Discernment (noun)

🔊 *disɜːrnmənt*

A key skill in critical thinking, ‘discernment’ is the ability to show good judgement about the quality of someone or something.

The connection between discernment and critical thinking is clear. An individual who practices discernment will embrace wider sources of information and integrate nuanced judgements about a situation before reaching a conclusion.

A SUPERPOWER?

If something is bristling and causing a reaction as you read this, perhaps you are sensing the implicit moral value and positive character judgement at play here. We are likely to also attribute wisdom, balanced thinking and fairness to someone who uses discernment in their choices. Even Jane Austen was a fan, saying,

‘There is a quickness of perception in some, a nicety in the discernment of character, a natural penetration, in short, which no experience in others can equal.’

Sounds like a super-human character trait doesn’t it? I can aspire to this, but I’m likely to fall short on many occasions. Hello, messy, imperfect life. Let’s explore for a minute whether discernment has any downsides.

A LUXURY?

Bingo.

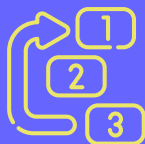
It doesn’t always suit a time-pressured situation – Austen’s ‘quickness of perception’ is a long labour for others.

Discernment, exercised to its fullest, can clog up decision-making and create frustration for others who do not share this virtue. I would say it’s a case of ‘time and place’. A discerning leader may create an investigative and curious culture in the team, to better uncover those wider perspectives and views. But linger too long on your choices and you are holding up the lunch queue, which will inevitably cause tension for others.

A SKILL FOR OUR AGE

And yet discernment is a skill for our age and one well worth developing further. Here are some mental models and physical actions you can use to bring the D-word forward in your own work and life.

MENTAL MODELS



Major the majors, minor the minors

A favourite phrase from a dear friend of mine, this mental model helps us get crisply clear on what really matters and what can be parked and let go of. A fantastic tool for prioritising our way out of the ‘everything is urgent’ swamp.



Assemble your challenge network

Discernment makes for a great team exercise. Shortlist the people in your network who would respond to a request for feedback and added perspectives. Adam Grant firmly believes in the power of constructive criticism, via what he calls his ‘challenge network of insightful critics’.



Better to best

Once you’ve categorised the good options from the bad, try re-classifying the good list into a spectrum from better to best.

PHYSICAL ACTIONS



Sleep on it

This is my personal ninja move to manage my raging impatience trait. I buy myself time to slow down my thinking with responses like, 'I'd like to think about that overnight and get back to you', or 'Give me some time to look into that, I want to take care with this decision'.



Say 'I don't know'

Lean into the 'I don't know' space of decision-making and admit out loud when you don't have a rock-solid sense of what to do next. Honest and transparent communication builds huge trust in decision making. Paired with some time to reflect, saying, 'I don't know yet, but I intend to' is a wonderfully authentic way to practise discernment.

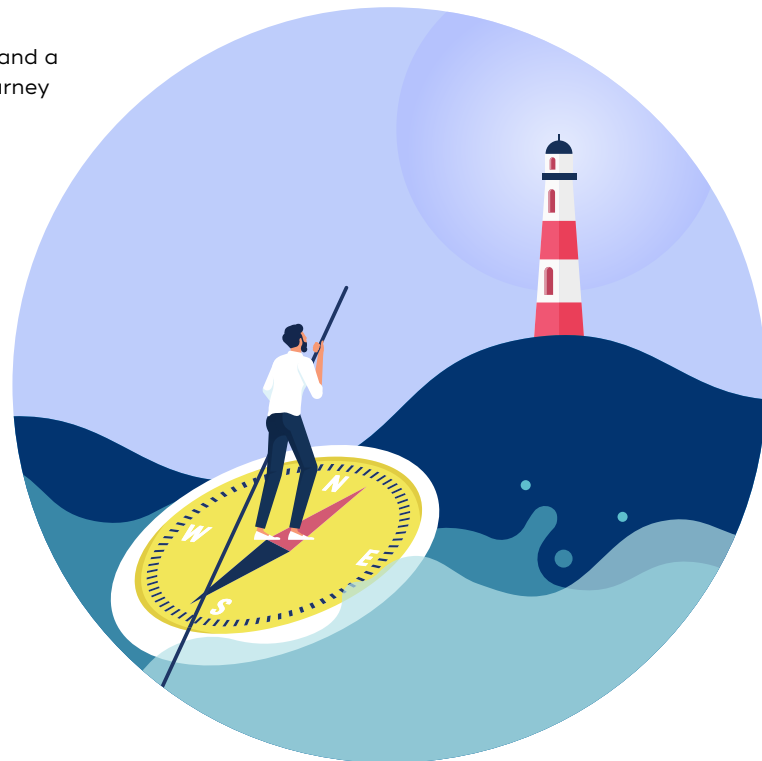
To wrap up, whilst discernment can seem like a lofty goal and a distant horizon, the direction of travel to get there is a journey filled with helpful lessons.

Discernment is a close cousin to the very humane and interpersonal realms of 'attunement' and 'sensitivity to others'. Yes, there are real and tangible benefits to discernment in the contemplation of decisions and work-based situations. But soaked throughout discernment is the business of being human. We can perhaps see that a discerning person might also feel a deep sensitivity to someone else's reality, really see them for who they are.

I love this quote from the 19th century poet Lord Byron,

'Her great merit is finding out mine - there is nothing so amiable as discernment.'

I hope you enjoy exploring discernment in your work and your human relationships this month.



MICHELLE HOWIE

Michelle Howie works with leaders, individuals, and organisations in New Zealand. As a facilitator and coach, Michelle creates spaces where people can hear their own voice and speak honestly. She is a writer, inflicting her words on innocent readers as she tries to make sense of the world. Behind all of Michelle's work is a rock-solid knowledge that we are equipped to handle life – and that from this place of knowing, life can be lived with more ease, more laughter, more creativity and lots of practical action! Read more at www.michellehowie.com or contact michelle@michellehowie.com.