

# Discernment

This article is the fifth in the leadership series. And the fifth attribute that defines a leader is discernment. It is the ability to get to the root of a matter. It relies on rational thinking as well as intuition. Effective leaders need this quality, although good leaders don't necessarily display it all the times...

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**M**arya Sklodowska grew up as a child in Poland. She loved going to school and learning. Marya's parents were both teachers. One day they lost their jobs and had to take in boarders for their survival, Marya had to help out with all the different chores, which took a lot of time. In spite of all the time Marya put into her work, she finished first in her high school writing her exams in the Russian language!

Since she could not afford higher education she became a governess and a tutor. She managed to save enough money and send her

elder sister through the medical school in Paris. She then moved to France and studied at Sorbonne. Two years later she graduated first in physics. A year later she earned her masters degree in mathematics.

Conducting experiments for the French industrial society, Marya turned her full attention to research. Her passion really was to search for the secrets to the rays emitted by Uranium. While she looked for a better laboratory to conduct her research, she met the man Pierre who was to later become her husband and research partner. You may not have heard of Marya Sklodowska, but you

perhaps have heard the name she preferred after marrying Pierre Curie in 1895 – Madam Marie Curie – the woman who did ground breaking work in discovering radioactivity (a term she coined) and opening the gates to nuclear physics and modern medical radiology.

Although she lost her husband in 1906, she continued her research work. Her research brought her great recognition – 15 gold medals, 19 degrees and two Nobel Prizes (Physics and Chemistry). Madam Curie once observed "Life is not easy for any of us, but what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe in that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained."

Her tenacity was evident not only in her research, but also from the practical application of her research. She used the technology to help save lives during World War I. Along with her daughter Irene (who would later also win a Nobel Prize) developed X-radiography and led the movement to equip the X-ray machines in ambulances. She trained technicians on how to use it and later helped form the Radium Institute at the University of Paris.

Madam Curie observed, "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood." Her intelligence and discernment allowed her to understand and discover many things that have made an immense impact on our world. While on the cutting edge of research with radioactive material, she did not protect herself from the effects of radiation. Unfortunately keen discernment did not extend her life. Her work took toll and she died of leukemia in 1934 at the age of 66.

## Of definitions and more

Discernment is the ability to find the root of



Madam Curie showed a lot of discernment in her work attitude, which the world recognised by awarding her two Nobel Prizes



the matter. It relies on rational thinking as well as intuition. Effective leaders need this quality, although good leaders do not display it all the time. These two examples will tell you what I mean:

"I tell you Wellington is a bad General, the English are bad soldiers; we will settle the matter by lunch time" – Napoleon Bonaparte at the breakfast table with his Generals before the battle of Waterloo in 1815.

"I think there is a world market for about five computers" – Thomas Watson the chairman of IBM in 1943.

Discernment is a vital quality for any leader who desires to maximise effectiveness. It helps in doing a few important things:

**Find out the core issues:** Leaders in large organisations are challenged to cope with chaos and complexities all the time. Many are not able to gather enough information to get a complete picture about many things. As a result they have to rely on discernment. Discernment enables the leader to see the partial picture, fill in the missing pieces intuitively and get to the core of the matter. It is like what Henry Mintzberg, the researcher at Mc Gill University once stated, "organisational effectiveness does not lie in that narrow minded concept called rationality. It lies in the blend of clear-headed logic and powerful intuition."

**Improve your problem solving ability:** If you strive to see the root cause of an issue, you can solve it. The closer you are to your area of gifting, the stronger will be your intuition and ability to see root causes. Work on your strengths to tap into your discernment potential.

**Weigh up your options for the greatest impact:** "Never ignore a gut feeling, but never believe that it's enough." Discernment isn't relying on intellect or intuition alone, but it allows you to use both to find the best option for your organisation or people.

**Proliferate your opportunities:** Leaders may appear to be lucky, but they create their own luck using the ability to discern – that willingness to use their experience and follow their instincts. Those who lack discernment are never at the

right place at the right time.

For scores of years the Swiss were timekeepers to the world and the ultimate watchmakers. They made the world's best and precision watches. By 1940s they controlled 80 per cent of the world market. The world lauded the Swiss for their precision products. During the late 1960s, an inventor presented his idea for a new type of a watch to a Swiss watch company who rejected the idea. Then the inventor took his idea to the other Swiss watch companies one by one, and they all rejected it too.

The inventor believed that his idea had merit, and so took the idea to Japan. The idea was a digital watch, and the company was Seiko. Today, 80 per cent of all watches are digital. The discernment driven decision of the inventor changed the entire course of destiny for the watch industry.

### Are you a discerning leader?

When faced with a complex issue, can you readily identify the heart of the matter? Are you able to see the root causes of difficult problems without having to get every bit of the information? Do you trust your intuition and rely on it as much as you do on your intellect and experience? If not, you need to cultivate it. Value non-traditional thinking. Embrace change, ambiguity and uncertainty. Broaden your horizons experientially. Your intuition will only increase with use.

### Hone the skills

How does one improve his or her discernment ability?

**Analyse past success** – look at the problems that you would have solved in the past, identify what were the root issues in these problems. Find out what enabled you to succeed. If you can capture the spirit of the matter you can probably learn to do it in the future too.

**Learn how others think** – look around you and even among those who touch a chord in you, read their biographies. Read the biographies of some of the best leaders. You can become more discerning by learning how discerning leaders think.

**Listen to your gut** – when did your intuition last speak and was correct? Understand what those experiences had in common and look for a pattern that may give you insight into your intuitive ability. **MMT**



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