

THE MIND'S CORE JUDGMENT CRITERIA

The Universal Criteria Behind Sound Judgment

Discernment is emotional intelligence's evaluation system — the set of abilities the mind uses to judge wisely. This supplement introduces the core judgment criteria that guide discernment, providing a foundation for understanding how they shape clear thinking and wise evaluation.

People already use discernment in subtle, unstructured ways, but much more explanation, guided practice, and step-by-step techniques are needed before discernment abilities can be strengthened and applied more consistently in everyday judgment and emotional habits.

Every conclusion we reach depends on how well discernment evaluates five major judgment criteria:

- Accuracy
- Priorities
- Fairness
- Meaning
- Practicality

These criteria appear across psychology, decision-science, and critical-thinking research. They are what the mind's primary evaluation functions — and modern life makes each one harder to apply. Below are the five criteria with brief explanations and examples to assist understanding.

1

Accuracy — “Is this actually true?”

Accuracy protects judgment from distortion. It evaluates whether information is correct, reliable, and free from misleading impressions.

Example: A coworker says, “Management is cutting everyone’s hours.” Accuracy asks: “*Has this been confirmed?*”

Accuracy keeps reactions grounded in verified information.

2

Meaning — “What does this actually imply?”

Meaning helps us interpret what something truly represents — not just how it feels in the moment.

Example: A friend replies “OK.” Meaning asks: “*Does this imply anger, or am I adding emotional meaning?*”

Meaning prevents misinterpretation.

Why Meaning Deserves Special Attention

Meaning is the most frequently used judgment criterion, because it is the first thing the mind interprets and the first thing to distort under pressure. Meaning determines what something is; meaningful determines whether it matters. Discernment must evaluate both. When meaning shifts, every other evaluation shifts with it.

Additional Dimensions of Meaning

Meaning also evaluates significance, value, and importance — deeper interpretive functions that help the mind understand why something matters. These appear in several positive dimensions:

- **Meaningful** — “Does this matter?”
- **Purposeful** — “Does this serve a purpose?”
- **Constructive** — “Does this contribute positively?”
- **Beneficial** — “Does this improve or help?”
- **Relevant** — “Does this fit the context?”

All of these deepen the mind's understanding of what something represents and why it matters — which is about meaning, not Accuracy, Priorities, Fairness, or Practicality.

3

Priorities — “What matters most right now?”

Priorities help us recognize what deserves attention and what does not. They keep judgment aligned with long-term well-being.

Example: You're flooded with notifications. Priorities ask: “Which of these truly matters right now?”

Priorities keep attention on what truly matters.

4

Fairness — “Am I evaluating this with balance?”

Fairness helps us judge situations with empathy, civility, and reduced bias.

Example: Someone makes a mistake that inconveniences you. Fairness asks: “Am I judging them based on one moment?”

Fairness protects judgment from emotional distortion.

5

Practicality — “Will this actually work?”

Practicality helps us choose the most sensible, workable approach — not the fastest or most familiar one.

Example: You consider confronting someone while emotions are high. Practicality asks: “Will this approach actually work under these conditions?”

Practicality keeps judgment grounded in real conditions.

Why These Five Criteria Are Harder Today

Modern environments overwhelm attention, accelerate reactions, amplify emotion, and repeat distorted content — all of which quietly weaken these five criteria.

Discernment becomes harder when:

- Speed replaces Reflection
- Emotion replaces Clarity
- Repetition replaces Accuracy
- Urgency replaces Priorities
- Pressure replaces Fairness
- Perfect outcomes or Expected failure replace Practicality

This is why strengthening discernment matters.

What Weakens These Five Criteria

Three forces make these judgment criteria collapse under pressure:

1

Weak Points

Internal tendencies that distort accuracy, meaning, priorities, fairness, and practicality — such as assumptions, emotional shortcuts, familiarity bias, and premature conclusions.

2

Default Substitutes

When the five criteria weaken, the mind automatically replaces them with: familiarity, emotion, pressure, defense, and assumptions. These are the mind's default settings — and they operate instantly and without discernment analysis.

3

Modern Pressures That Accelerate Collapse

Modern information pressures — speed, stimulation, repetition, and emotional intensity — accelerate these collapses, making the five criteria much harder to apply in daily life. These pressures strike constantly and from every direction, overwhelming evaluation before discernment has time to activate.

Learn More

To explore more about how discernment works and how to strengthen these criteria, visit e-ii.org for the other supplements left in this series. For a more thorough understanding of emotional intelligence knowledge and skills, explore the Institute's full free EI curriculum.