

# Making Companies Whole: the Tricordant Approach

by Alastair Mitchell-Baker



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It is my conviction that many of today's organisations are 'unwhole'. There is no shortage of evidence which points to this conclusion. Around 16 million, that is 64%, of employees don't believe in what their company stands for. A survey of 2500 workers, employers and entrepreneurs found that 58% change their personality and identity to fit in at work. Pfeffer and Sutton observe that 'Most employees have a hard time getting excited about the glories of maximising shareholder value... The emphasis on financial goals at the expense of providing meaning... contributes to the segmented existence of so many people's lives. They spend a lot of time on the job, but find meaning and fulfilment elsewhere.'<sup>1</sup> A Cabinet Office report said of employees that 'It is clear that a lack of control at work, for example due to inflexible work content and patterns and rigid hierarchies, can cause increased

general morbidity as well as constituting poor management practice. There is also significant evidence that poor workplace design can have a detrimental effect on health.'<sup>2</sup>

How has this loss of wholeness come about? I suggest it is through a combination of specialisation, control and scale. This was very evident to me during the time I worked in the National Health Service: a huge organisation with people performing highly specialised functions, often run by people at the top who wanted to be in control. Large organisations that are good places to work are those that have paid special attention to corporate culture and the way they are structured. There are links between whole systems organisational health and corporate performance. This comes out clearly in important studies by Kotter and Heskett on the one hand and Collins and Porras on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore a long-term study of Whitehall employees carried out over four decades found that the lower the grade of civil servant, the more likely you were to die from coronary heart disease.<sup>4</sup> Those who are not in control and able to make their own decisions suffer the greatest stress. Employees will experience worse health if their employment is insecure, work is monotonous and repetitive, they have little or no autonomy and discretion over the tasks they do, there is an imbalance between effort and reward so that workers feel exploited or taken for granted, and there is an absence of procedural justice in the workplace. Be careful: your status at work can seriously damage your health!

A good test of a satisfying job is how you feel when you wake up on Monday morning. Do you have a feeling of eager anticipation? Many people wake

up on Mondays with a feeling of dread – often because their jobs have been poorly designed. Herzberg says, 'If you want people motivated to do a good



■ Frederick Herzberg ■

job, give them a good job to do'.<sup>5</sup> Well motivated employees work for organisations that are normally productive, profitable and providing good customer service: problems are resolved much more quickly.

### The Tricordant Approach

When we think about whole work in our consultancy practice, Tricordant, we are seeking to come up with an organisation, team and individual job design which reflect the nature of God and his stewardship of creation. We take seriously the idea that we are co-creators, and that the Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city – this is not an accident. Human beings participate with God in the transformation of the world, in processes of management, culture and cultivation.

We believe healthy organisations which practise 'whole work':

- reflect the Trinitarian nature of God in the way they are organised
- are highly efficient and effective in achieving their purposes and serving customer needs
- are 'great places to work', where the vision, values, culture and spirit of the organisation connects to the core meaning and purposes of the enterprise, thus energising and motivating them
- provide whole work for individuals within energised and well led teams
- are 'learning organisations'
- are environmentally sustainable
- benefit the local communities where they operate
- can also contribute to the individual's and organisation's spiritual development and transformation

Our vision at Tricordant is to become a thriving Christian company providing effective whole organisation design and development consultancy. This is based on a combination of biblical and theological principles and insights, along with the best in current theory and reflective practice – currently drawing from the particular areas of managing

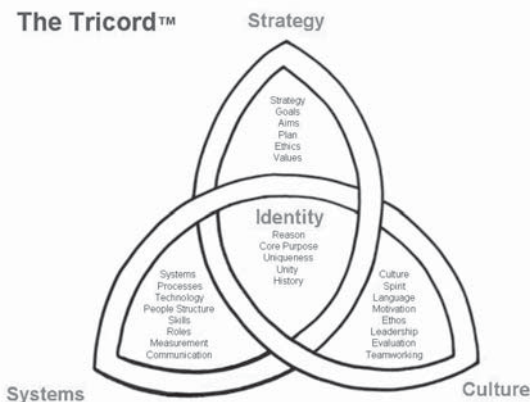
change, group facilitation, complex adaptive systems, organisation design, lean thinking, and socio-technical systems.

Let me explain how I came to work for Tricordant. After graduation, I had 15 wonderful years working in general management for the NHS. Frequently during that time I asked the question 'how does my faith relate to my work?' I always felt the answer should be more than the conventional ones of good ethical behaviour, displaying integrity, and shining brightly in a dark world. But I struggled to see what difference faith made beyond those worthy aspirations. In 2001 I experienced what my regional manager called 'accidental redundancy'! When my part of the NHS mega-organisation was disbanded, I became a consultant, and met up with Christian Schumacher, author of *To Live and Work, God in Work*<sup>6</sup> and director of the consultancy Work Structuring. In him I found someone writing about theology and work in a way I hadn't encountered before. His thinking made a profound impact on me. Several of us worked with him for some time before we felt called by God, three years ago, to set up a new organisation, Tricordant.

Marvin Weisbord has traced a leaning curve whereby from 1900-50 the pattern was that experts were brought in to solve problems; from 1950 'everybody' solved problems; from 1965 experts improved whole systems; and from 2000 everybody is involved in the improvement of whole systems.<sup>7</sup> At Tricordant we

try to facilitate the latter. Most of our clients are looking for that elusive blend of clarity of view, savings, productivity, energy and enthusiasm, connection to purpose and shared vision – all in rapid time! Often they are looking for mechanical solutions but we have learnt that these do not work. Using Alistair Mant's metaphor,<sup>8</sup> an organisation is not like a bicycle which can be taken to pieces and then put back together again. It is more like a frog. There is a limited amount to which you can take a frog to pieces - it's liable to die! Each organisation needs to understand itself. We believe that this model that we call a Tricord is extremely illuminating for understanding any unit of a system, whether at the individual team, large organisation or system level.

Every organisation has three key domains: strategy, concerned with goals and values; systems,



concerned with structures, processes, jobs and roles; and culture, the so-called 'soft side', concerned with teamworking, spirit, and the language which gives life to an organisation.

These three domains overlap, and in the centre is found a fourth component, the organisation's core *identity*. These different parts need to be balanced and aligned. We find it helpful to ask: what is the Tricord for the system we are working with? At the heart of what the team or organisation does lies some significant event, a transformation which gives meaning and purpose to the whole enterprise. At the heart of what goes on in an operating theatre, for instance, is a surgical intervention to improve a patient's health. It makes sense to draw a Tricord round that operating theatre. As consultants, we look for significant events and build teams around them.

### God the Trinity

Behind all this we discern a theological pattern – what is sometimes called analogical theology. As Paul says in Romans 1:20: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made...' Or Genesis 1:27: 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.' The Trinitarian nature of God is

evident in the world that he has made. Christian Schumacher associates the different persons of the Trinity with different aspects of work: the Father with the planning aspect, the Son with the performative aspect, and the Spirit with the evaluative aspect. Interpreted in Tricordant terms, the Trinity looks like the diagram below. But the three persons of the Trinity should not be thought



of in compartmentalised terms; there is a fundamental unity within God, expressed in his core identity: 'I am who I am'. The dynamic flow of interrelationship means the Trinity can even be seen as a dance.

This leads to the idea of the whole work cycle, which finds its echo in quality cycles, Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles and learning cycles. Work that is satisfying entails all three elements of planning, delivering and learning: an active cycle in which each team and indeed individual should be involved, rather than being restricted to one activity alone. The cycle should be constructed

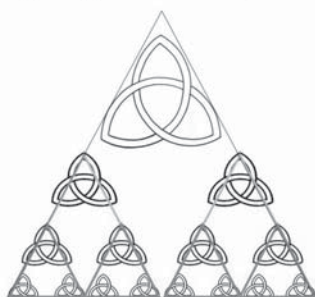
around a significant event, something where transformation takes place, such as the baking of bread, the delivery of mail, or the giving of advice. Where work is segmented into three separate elements, as with the traditional assembly line, unhealthy jobs are usually the result, and people will feel disempowered. Dorothy L. Sayers applied the creative Trinitarian cycle to her own craft of writing:

'For the writer the Idea (Father) is equated with having the idea for a book, or the book as a thought; the Energy (Son) is the incarnation of that idea in the words or as the book is written; and the Power (Holy Spirit) is the communication of the image in power or the book as read.'<sup>9</sup>

Such an understanding of work has implications for the issue of human scale. What is the appropriate size for a team to operate in this way? Teams need to be small enough to be clustered around significant events. So an organisation will consist of lots of different teams each with their own tricord, all involved in planning, delivering and learning, and all linked together – through effective team leaders - in a coherent way. Put lots of healthy and effective teams together and you get a healthy organisation.

We have found that this approach works in some very disparate settings, from sexual health clinics in Stockport to submarines in the Royal Navy. In the clinic context, the challenge was to help people see that there was a 'promised land' where things would be different, and for them to reach it they needed to visualise the structure of the organisation

### Aligning the Whole Service



differently. In the naval setting, identifying the core identity both of the Royal Navy and the subcontractors they used was crucial. We have repeatedly found ourselves engaging with clients at multiple levels – emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. That's one reason why we feel exhausted at the end of a two or three day workshop! We also find that we need to apply our thinking to ourselves, working as a fellowship with a high level of mutual relationship. We try to practise generosity, not least in the giving away of ideas. And we find it very important to have people supporting our work through prayer.

Finally, we see our calling in the light of Jesus' identification of his own calling in Luke 4:18-19. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' We believe that an approach based on the Tricord can be a means to set people free, that it can represent good news that brings life and wholeness to an organisation. ■

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pfeffer J. and Sutton, R.I. (2006), *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half Truths and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management*, Harvard Business School Press
- <sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office, DWP & HSE, 2004 *Surely we need more than this?*
- <sup>3</sup> Kotter J. and Heskett, J.L. (1992), *Corporate Culture and Performance*, Free Press; Collins J. and Porras, J. (1995), *Built to Last*, Random House
- <sup>4</sup> Marmot, M. (2004), *Status Syndrome: How your social standing directly affects your health and life expectancy*, Bloomsbury
- <sup>5</sup> See Herzberg, F., Mausner, B., Snyderman, B.B. (1959), *The Motivation to Work* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), John Wiley
- <sup>6</sup> Schumacher, C. (1989), *To Live and to Work*, Marc Europe; Schumacher, C. (1998), *God in Work*, Lion
- <sup>7</sup> Weisbord, M. (2004), *Productive Workplaces Revisited*, Jossey-Bass/Wylie
- <sup>8</sup> Mant, A. (1999), *Intelligent Leadership*, Allen & Unwin, p.40
- <sup>9</sup> Sayers, D.L. (1941), *Mind of the Maker*, Methuen