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Seeing Things Whole: A Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life: A Framework for Many Occasions

DEBORAH ASBERRY

CommunityWorks, Inc.

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Introduction:

DISMAYED AND DISILLUSIONED BY THE ORGANIZATION IN WHICH I found myself, feeling betrayed and hopelessly stuck in a job that was literally draining the life out of me, I can still hear his voice on the other end of the phone line; “From what you are saying, it sounds as though you are caught in the dilemma of competing bottom lines. You care deeply about the internal culture of Acme Consulting (name has been changed to protect the guilty) and are trying to align the internal culture with the services you are providing to your external publics. Kathy sees your attempts as unproductive and non-essential, she only understands one bottom line, that being one of productivity and profitability. You are trying to honor three.” His words resonated deeply with what I was feeling and experiencing, and yet I didn’t understand quite what he was saying. “What do you mean by competing bottom

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lines?” I asked. The ensuing conversation changed my life. I resigned from the organization that was unconscious of its shadow and unwilling to consider any bottom line other than *stewardship* and joined a friend who had founded a small consulting company. *Seeing Things Whole* (STW) was soon to become a staple of my newly claimed consulting practice.

First Steps:

Once introduced to the elegant simplicity of the STW model, I was hooked. My first application of the model was with the board of a prestigious college preparatory girls academy. The school’s founding religious order felt as though the board, which was comprised of a few of their own sisters as well as parents who were wealthy donors to the school, was in serious ‘mission drift’. The parents wanted the school to be an Ivy League preparatory school, with perfect SAT scores as the ultimate indicator. The founding spirit of the school was that of a girl’s academy dedicated to service, spirituality and academic excellence. The internal culture of the school seemed to be moving away from service and spirituality, with academic performance taking precedence. The board was conflicted, the meetings often tense, and the sponsoring religious order felt as though their capacity to influence the direction of the school was being seriously eroded. I knew very little about the STW model, but I remembered the concept of *competing bottom lines*, and felt confident that the concept would be very useful to this board. I called my friend who had talked to me about the idea of *competing bottom lines* a year earlier, asked him to coach me through the concepts and send me anything he had on the model. Thus began my orientation and formal introduction to *Seeing Things Whole*.

Armed with one coaching session and a faxed slick-paper copy of an early manuscript describing *Seeing Things Whole*, I designed the board retreat using my new found model. The retreat was a big success! I introduced the concept of the model, (shaking in my proverbial boots, hoping no-one would ask in depth questions) divided the board members into *identity*, *purpose*, and *stewardship* sub-groups, each equipped with the inquiry germane to their particular organizational dimension. I additionally instructed them to describe the current reality of the school specific to their organizational dimension and to explore together scenarios for a

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preferred future relative to their dimension.¹ As each sub-group reported the outcomes of their conversation, a rough strategic plan began to emerge; framed within the three organizational dimensions or ‘offices’ of the STW model. The participants of each of the sub-groups were animated and enthusiastic about the work they had accomplished and willing to continue to work on further developing the ideas generated from their small groups into goals and objectives. The board used the framework over the next twelve months as a tool for developing and implementing their plan of action. Additionally, the model served as a framework for engaging in an honest conversation about the competing nature of the different dimensions, and allowed a forum for the sponsoring religious order to speak to the founding mission of the academy and their concerns about losing the foundational values on which the school was founded. The framework ‘held’ the conversation in a way that respected the diverse perspectives and provided a common reference and context in which to find common ground.

A Universal Framework:

I grew in my understanding of the theoretical foundations of the *Seeing Things Whole* model and began using it whenever a client needed work with strategic planning. I have found that the model is theoretically sound and universally resonant for all types of organizations. Many times I have been able to use it as a quick reference for organizing and referring to issues facing an organization, giving a structure in which to hold the issues and normalize the tensions that a system may be experiencing.

Once the primary stakeholders of an organization understand the three dimensions of ‘offices’ defined by the model, they can begin to explore the current reality relative to that dimension, the values that guide that dimension, the shadows that may be present, and the preferred future relative to each dimension. Some organizations readily adopt the model as a common reference point in which to organize their goals and objectives. Others seem to identify with the concepts, the gifts and shadows specific to each dimension and the wholeness the model offers by identifying three competing dimensions of their

¹ I used the creative tension concept as developed by Robert Fritz and amplified by Peter Senge as a way to invite the small groups into a preliminary strategic planning conversation.

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organizational life. Many of my clients find the model useful as a reference for engaging in problem solving and decision making; placing a focused issue in the center of the model and exploring the benefits and concerns impacting each aspect of the system relative to the issue being discussed.

The portability and direct application of the model is due to the profound simplicity and directness that the framework provides. The three offices or dimensions of the model are archetypal to systems; they express universal patterns or themes present in all systems, thus the resonance and capacity to grasp the ideas once explained. The model is deeply grounded in theory which includes the disciplines of organizational theory and theology, so there is integrity to its application that is readily understood by anyone first hearing of the model.

The model is flexible enough to be used for a weekend board retreat for small non-profit organizations in which the participants receive a brief introduction to the model and then apply the concepts to their own particular issues and needs. There is almost always an 'aha' moment when it is apparent that one dimension of their system has been ignored or one has taken dominance over the other two. The framework offers a safe and non-judgmental method of exploring issues that are often conflictual and eroding the effectiveness and health of the organization.

Once the conversation has occurred, the board members may choose to continue to utilize the model for ongoing work, or the model may have served its purpose as a framework for 'holding' the conversation.

Larger systems have used the framework as a guide for developing and implementing a systems wide strategic plan; orienting steering committees and subcommittees to the model and using it as a common reference for exploring their current reality, developing guiding values, revising their mission and creating a vision for their organization.

A Theoretical Framework:

In addition to using the three-fold model as a guide for strategic planning, *Seeing Things Whole* provides a theoretical framework in which to explore the complex and diverse issues facing organizations. The understanding and application of the concepts can spiral into deeper constructs if the organization desires to spend time exploring the model's richness. The

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shadow dimension of the model is especially intriguing; drawing from the theories of Jungian psychology and theology. This aspect of the model allows for radical truth telling about the dark side of organizational life that often is glossed over or ignored. The model invites an exploration into those darker aspects of the system in a way that feels safe and honors the ‘goodness’ of the organization while pointing the way to transformation or healing. However, if time does not allow for that kind of conversation, or if the client is not requesting that kind of an intervention, the model can serve as a quick reference and user friendly framework for exploring the presenting issues of the system.

It is also important to note that the model can be used either explicitly or implicitly as a conceptual framework. If time or circumstance necessitate, I will apply the concepts of the model in my own assessment of a system’s issues and may not explicitly refer to the model in my conversation with the members of the organization, especially in initial conversations. Later, if appropriate, I may refer back to an earlier conversation about competing bottom lines, a ‘good’ opposing a ‘good’ in decision making, or being inflated about ones mission to the detriment of balancing the budget, and introduce the model as a framework or tool for further exploring the issues facing the organization.

A ‘Good Enough’ Approach is Essential:

As mentioned previously, the three- fold model is deep and rich in its theoretical grounding. It is tempting to insist with my clients that they understand the fullness and complexity that the model embodies; I so want them to grasp the *theology* of the model, the idea that *values* can be developed specific to each office, and the model can always serve as a *basis for decision making* and *issues clarification*; if they would only allow me to stay with them and continually ‘unpack’ the richness that the model provides. I have learned humility and restraint along the way.

The model can indeed do all of the above, and I have had the privilege of working over time with clients using the model to illuminate the myriad of issues confronting an organization and going on to develop interventions that attend to the identified issues. I have also learned that if my client decides to use the three- fold model as a way of organizing a weekend retreat, and through that experience gain clarity about their organization and develop a facility and fluency with the basic tenets that the model offers, that is ‘good

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enough'.² An image that has helped me is that of a seven layer chocolate cake. The model is as rich and delicious as a seven-layer cake. Sometimes, my clients want only to lick the icing. That doesn't mean that they have not experienced the model, they have indeed tasted of its goodness; if only superficially. Others cut of a huge piece, take a few bites, and decide it's just too rich, and they have had enough. Others enjoy each delightful bite, fully experiencing its richness and depth. What I know and must trust is that they know what they need; I am there to 'serve' the amount that is being asked or required.

I have also learned that the model continues to 'work' over time in subtle and indirect ways. The image of the three- fold model and its corresponding 'story' is archetypal, it holds a universal truth and therefore continues to unfold. The model provides a point of reference that can be returned to again and again, a *call* to 'see things whole', to remember the primary stakeholders of each office, and to honor the natural tension points along the way. The model can indeed 'stand alone' over time and continue to work its grace.

Endnote:

The richness and depth contained in the *Seeing Things Whole Three-Fold Model* has served me well on my personal journey as an organizational consultant. It served as a lifeline to me when I found myself inside an organization that was operating out of its shadow and militantly unwilling to explore the wholeness that was possible if all three of the dimensions of the system could be honored. The model gave words and explanation to an experience that was fraught with frustration, hurt, and a sense of hopelessness. I will be forever grateful.

² the 'good enough' concept comes from Bruno Bettelheim in his book [A Good Enough Parent](#), Knopf Publishing, 1987