



Seeing tomorrow's ideas...Today

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Vol. 4, No.6, June 2007

Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Most of us think of smoky, candlelit night clubs or street performers in New Orleans when we hear the word jazz; our first thought will most likely not be innovation. Read this month's newsletter to find out how the world of jazz offers many "riffs" on innovation.

Riffs on Innovation from the World of Jazz

Riffs...short, punchy musical motifs that can stand on their own
- John Kao, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*

The world of jazz is a culture and a model that has been, and remains a hot bed of innovation. Jazz musicians are known for their ability to introduce new ideas: new forms, new techniques, new sources, and new styles. They continue to find new ways to play their instruments, new ways to establish unique identities, and they have both expanded and re-invented their roles. The foundation of jazz music demands improvisation, spontaneous creativity or instant innovation from every jazz player every time they perform. From the Latin "improvisus" meaning "not seen ahead of time," improvisation is "playing extemporaneously - composing on the spur of the moment." Interestingly, the jazz band and jazz improvising can serve as an example of an organization designed for maximizing learning and innovation.

Frank Barrett, in his article titled *Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizational Implications for Organizational Learning*, offers seven dimensions of creativity in jazz translating these into implications for organizations wanting to maximize learning and innovation.

- ✦ **Provocative competence: Deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns** - Jazz musicians often approach their work with a self-reflexiveness, guarding against the temptation to rely on ingrained habits, so that they don't repeat stock phrases and comfortable solos that contradict the goal of improvisation. Provocative competence requires its members to abandon over reliance on automatic processing and practicing familiar routines. To replicate this in an organization, the organization needs to challenge habits and conventional practices, challenging members to experiment in the margins and to stretch in new directions.

- ✦ **Embracing errors as a source of learning** - Jazz musicians regularly make mistakes, often without the audience's awareness. What's different from what is experienced in most organizational settings is that jazz musicians will use errors as seeds for activating and arousing the imagination - repeating, amplifying, or developing the mistake until it becomes a new pattern. Translated for organizations, this means that leaders need to question the way they look at mistakes and errors, distinguishing between errors that are the result of carelessness and those that are a result of caring deeply about a project. Errors need to be considered as points of creative departure treating unexpected events into learning opportunities, imaginative triggers and prompts for new action. Organizations will be more innovative by creating a climate that values errors as a source of learning.
- ✦ **Shared orientation toward minimal structures that allow maximum flexibility** - Creativity is enhanced in jazz when emphasis is placed on coordinating action, i.e. around songs, with minimal consensus, minimal disclosure, and minimal, simple structures. From an organizational perspective, a practice of rapid prototyping, regular updating, and changing of design prototypes can allow for cross-discipline communication so that people can create while knowing how and when their ideas fit into the whole evolving system. Rapid prototypes function like the loose framework of the song: they leave a great deal of room to depart and deviate; and yet there is enough structure there to give players enough collective confidence to play together. The temporal updating of the minimal structure notifies everyone where others are in their incremental innovations, like a chord changes of a song; this increases the likelihood that people can achieve a successful joint awareness throughout the life of a project.
- ✦ **Distributed task: continual negotiation and dialogue toward dynamic synchronization** - Jazz is an ongoing social accomplishment, where there is an ongoing give and take between members. When jazz musicians are "achieving a groove" they are most likely experiencing almost a spiritual intimacy, synergy, surrender, transcendence, and flow together. When jazz musicians are able to successfully connect with one another at this level and establish a groove, they sometimes experience an ability to perform beyond their capability. To emulate this within an organization, leaders need to pay attention to intuitive and emotional connections between organizational members, the experience of passionate connection that inspire deeper levels of involvement and committed participation.
- ✦ **Reliance on retrospective sense-making** - Improvisation in jazz is often linked to the concept of bricolage - the art of making usage of whatever is at hand. The bricoleur, like the jazz musician, examines and queries the raw materials available and entices some order, creating unique combinations through the process of working through the resources he/she finds. Organizations frequently forget how much improvisation, bricolage, and retrospective sense making are required to complete daily tasks, i.e. in spite of the wish for a rational plan of predictable action, members often must take a look around and act without a clear sense of how things will unfold. Many jobs within organizations require bricolage, i.e. fumbling around, experimenting, and patching together an understanding of problems from bits and pieces of experience, improvising with materials at hand. Few problems have their own definitive solutions.
- ✦ **"Hanging out": Membership in a community of practice** - An essential part of learning jazz is becoming a member of the jazz community, "hanging out," learning the code, behaving like one of the members. Similarly, to foster learning and innovation in organizations, leaders must see beyond conventional, canonical job descriptions and recognize the value of communities of practice. They need to provide learners with access to experienced practitioners, through

formal and informal meetings, conversations, stories, myths, rituals, etc.

- ✦ **Taking turns soloing and supporting** - Most jazz bands rotate the "leadership" of the band meaning that they take turns soloing and supporting other soloists by providing rhythmic and harmonic background. This equalitarian approach assures that each player gets an opportunity to develop a musical idea while others create space for this development to occur. Organizations must continue to find ways to include voices that have traditionally been silenced and to reward supportive behaviours versus individual performance and achievement behaviours. One way to do this would be to provide organizational "jam" sessions where members take turns thinking out loud while others listen. "Jam" as defined in John Kao's book, is "to take a theme, a question, a notion, a whim, an idea, pass it around, break it up, put it together, turn it over, run it backward, fly with it as far as possible, out of sight, never threatening...but yes, here it comes, homing in, changed, new, the essence, like nothing ever before." Finding ways to recognize and reward those who strive to nourish, strengthen, and enhance the expressive capacity of relationships will unleash an organization's capacity to improvise and innovate.

What's the Bottom line

Watch a jazz band in action - they have the ability to make music together in a way that transcends boundaries creating something new and unique each time they play together and they are happy and laughing while they are doing it! - there is something here for all of us to learn.

This month's newsletter is adapted from Frank Barrett's article titled *Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizational Implications for Organizational Learning* (To download Frank Barrett's complete article, go to <http://www.leader-values.com/content/detail.asp?ContentDetailID=961>).



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If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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