



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Leadership and All That Jazz

Perhaps never before has jazz served as apt a metaphor for what is required of our organizations and those who lead them; I was reminded of that recently watching Mulgrew Miller and Wingspan perform at the Jazz Standard in Manhattan. The "jamming" was great, each artist excelled at what he did best, ensemble members were clearly inspired and totally engaged, and so were we. Today organizations and their leaders are also called upon to "jam" or innovate around a main theme - their mission and goals, they must bring together the right "artists" and call out their best - blending individual freedom with collective purpose, and deliver a "performance" that keeps customers engaged.

What can we learn from jazz as leaders and organizations?

Passion New York is blessed with an abundance of jazz artists - some at clubs like the Jazz Standard, some in Central Park, and many simply performing at street corners. One thing they all seem to have in common is a love for jazz; they play jazz because it's what they love to do; one gets the impression that paid or not, they're going to play; it's who they are. George Carlin described jazz musicians as *"the only workers I can think of who are willing to put in a full shift for pay and then go somewhere else and continue to work for free."* As John Lewis, jazz pianist and musical director of the Modern Jazz Quartet put it: *"The reward for playing jazz is playing jazz."*

Diversity Mulgrew and Wingspan ensemble members covered the age spectrum, dressed differently, played different instruments and played differently. Each was independent and had his own distinct style, but all were there for a common purpose; like the most effective leaders and organizations, they pulled off unity with diversity. As Margaret Fuller, an early equal rights advocate put it: *"Harmony exists in difference no less than in likeness, if only the same key note govern both parts."* In his book Jamming,* John Kao tells a great story about how an already diverse group anchored by Thelonius Monk and Kenny Clarke invited a young saxophonist to sit in who "played stuff they never heard before;" that was Charlie Parker, one of the all-time jazz greats whose style gave birth to the "bebop" movement.

"Loose and tight" Jazz ensembles have leaders, and often they lead off with the main melody. Jazz leaders do not direct like classical orchestra conductors, though; it seems more like an invitation, or a pulling approach, than a pushing kind of direction. Usually they carry the main melody or beat and there are general expectations around who plays when and for how long, but there is a lot freedom around what exactly members play and how far "out there" or "off script" they go. Jazz for me

epitomizes the best kind of "alignment," and what Jim Collins** characterizes as strictness around "core ideology" coupled with "adaptive mechanisms."

Innovation It's usually when you can tell that one artist has strayed pretty far from where he's been before that things get interesting - and more creative, and more entertaining. That's what draws the most applause, and it's fun to see the genuine appreciation of those efforts by fellow ensemble members. "Mistakes" don't really seem like mistakes in good jazz as much as efforts to create something that didn't exist before. Listen to Miles Davis who said: *"Do not fear mistakes; there are none,"* or in Ornette Coleman's words: *"It was when I found out I could make mistakes that I knew I was on to something."* Of course the kinds of mistakes that Ornette or Miles talked about are different than mistakes that I or anyone attempting jazz who hadn't yet "paid his dues" would make. Charlie Parker put it best when he said: *"You've got to learn your instrument. Then, you practice, practice, practice. And then, when you finally get up there on the bandstand, forget all that and just wail."*

Trust and Teamwork What a marvel to observe how a talented ensemble picks up wherever one of those experimental riffs heads and weaves it back into the main melody or beat. Part of what makes that possible is the trust that you can almost feel - trust that comes from confidence in each other's abilities, and in many cases from much experience together. Oscar Peterson, another jazz great, put it this way: *"It's the group sound that's important, even when you're playing a solo. You not only have to know your own instrument, you must know the others and how to back them up at all times. That's jazz."*

Connection and Communication I was close enough to Mulgrew's ensemble that I could also see how well they stayed in touch - especially how closely Mulgrew connected with whomever had the lead for the moment; he kept up the melody while in almost constant eye contact with whomever was jamming, almost anticipating what came next.

Immersing ourselves in any kind of different medium or venue than what we are used to can lead to insights and a different way of knowing; my immersion in the NYC Jazz Standard experience drove that point home for me. Do yourself a favor; visit the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis, or a jazz club elsewhere to see what I mean. For those interested in exploring the world of jazz as a medium for innovation, leadership and engaging organizations, I encourage you to learn more about Michael Gold in the Twin Cities and to visit his web page: www.jazz-impact.com

The jazz artist Thelonious Monk was right: *"Talking about jazz is like dancing about architecture."* So, enough.

What can you as a leader learn from jazz or "jamming?"

How might your organization benefit by performing more like a jazz ensemble?

* Kao, John. Jamming: The Art And Discipline Of Business Creativity; Harper Business, New York, NY, 1996 - Available from [inTEgro's Bookstore](#)

** Collins, Jim. Good To Great; Harper Business, New York, NY, 2001 - Available from [inTEgro's Bookstore](#)

"Leaders must encourage their organizations to dance to forms of music yet unheard."

Warren Bennis

"Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out your horn."

Charlie Parker

"A good quartet is like a good conversation among friends interacting to each other's ideas."

Stan Getz

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