

JAZZ – THE NEW METAPHOR

by Geof Cox, from *Cuttings* 51, June 2004

One of the Snippets that I have collected for this edition of *Cuttings* was from Warren Bennis: *"I used to think that running an organisation was equivalent to conducting a symphony orchestra. But I don't think that's quite it; it's more like jazz. There is more improvisation."* And as often happens when I am putting together an issue of *Cuttings*, a number of serendipitous ideas arrive on the same theme.

An article by Jeff Perry appears on HR.com which cites jazz as being America's original diversity success story. A blog makes comparisons with playing live jazz and project management. Even an article in my wife's *Community Care* magazine objects to the use of machine meta-phors in favour of jazz and gardening. My own archive came up with a number of articles including one from Frank Barrett (jazz pianist and professor of organisation behaviour) following a workshop with him that I attended in London, and one from Gary Burton, the renowned vibraphone player and composer. A Google search on the above title produced 15,200 references in 0.17 seconds. This seems to be a hot topic! So, putting on a Gary Burton CD, here is a summary of some of the key points from my analysis.

One of the repeating uses of the jazz metaphor is in its comparison to the symphony orchestra in terms of leadership style and behaviour, as Bennis uses it. Max Depree in his 1992 book *Leadership Jazz* explains it thus: *"Jazz-band leaders must choose the music, find the right musicians, and perform – in public. But the effect of the performance depends on so many things – the environment, the volunteers playing in the band, the need for everyone to perform as individuals and as a group, the absolute dependence of the leader on the members of the band, the need of the leader for the followers to play well. What a summary of an organisation"*

As Frank Barrett says: *"when the players get together they do what managers find themselves doing: fabricating and inventing novel responses without a prescribed plan and without certainty of outcomes; discovering the future that their action creates as it unfolds."*

Gary Burton makes an observation from his experience of symphony orchestras – there is often a battle between the conductor and the members, with the members playing up and playing games to try to upset the conductor. The conductor has all of the control, the players are disempowered, so they abdicate. Exactly what goes on in corporate organisations – the orchestra conductor metaphor is not helpful.

That is not to say that a jazz combo is a democratic or communistic organisation at the other end of the scale from the autocratic orchestra. As Gary Burton adds, there is always a strong leader in a jazz group – the difference is that the jazz

leader wants strong players who can challenge each other, not yes-men/women – “*but the vision is always mine.*”

For organisations who have prided themselves on minimal risk-taking, the new world of fast cycle change is daunting. No longer do they have the luxury of long lead times, opportunities to pilot or engineer-out problems (or have lengthy rehearsals). They need to operate more in the here-and-now. Creating and implementing simultaneously with its inherent risk taking, like a jazz band.

Here are some practical ideas from jazz improvisation:

Interrupt habits – One of the most significant impediments to an effective change is habit. By definition, improvisation aims to avoid the routine and safe by seeking something unique for each moment. Constantly challenge to do something different, stay alert and active.

Embrace errors – Miles Davis once said, “*There are no mistakes in jazz.*” Yet in most businesses to make a mistake is often career-limiting. The best jazz – and the best learning – often comes from making a mistake then adjusting future actions as a result.

Minimal structure – Organisations tend to have policies, structures and reporting lines that inhibit flexibility and improvisation. Jazz bands operate on the minimal of structure to enhance flexibility.

Listen intently – A jazz band doesn’t know where they are going, so they need to continually listen, challenge and build the future that fits – just like organisations in a chaotic environment.

Everyone solos and supports – If you are not soloing, then support; and encourage everyone to take the lead, especially with customers or with novel situations.

Learn informally - Musicians hang out together informally, listen to recordings of great musicians, discuss them in great detail, memorise the great solos and jam together. [Arie de Geus makes the same point: *Does Your Organisation Flock* (Cuttings 29)]

Let’s make music...

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