



CUTTINGS

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JAZZ – THE NEW METAPHOR

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 metaphors 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...

Reforming Project Management, <http://halmacomber.com>

All that jazz Michael Gold, *The Chief Executive*, August-Sept, 2002

Rage against the machine, Michael Pinnock, *Community Care* April 2004

Lessons on business from a jazz legend. Michael Schrage *Fast Company*, Dec 1996

Jazz: America's Original Diversity Success Story, Jeff Perry, *HR.com*, April 2004

Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations, Frank Barrett, *Organization Science* 1998

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Snippets

A collection of thought provokers and quotations ...

- ✂ "PowerPoint doesn't communicate – you do." *Guy Browning*
- ✂ The criteria applied by clients when selecting consultants: Relationship – Trust – Cost – Quality. *Gartner Research 2003*
- ✂ "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." *Warren Bennis*
- ✂ "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment." *Marcus Aurelius*
- ✂ "That the birds of worry and care fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent." *Chinese Proverb*
- ✂ "If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to sleep with a mosquito." *Anita Roddick*
- ✂ "Leadership is the ability to align strengths toward a goal or vision in such a way that weaknesses are irrelevant." *Peter Drucker*
- ✂ "Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." *Victor Frankl*
- ✂ "Our only sustainable competitive advantage is our ability to learn faster than the competition." *Arie de Geus*
- ✂ "There are so many issues it's like taking out a subscription." *Overheard at the 2004 Consultant's Forum*
- ✂ "The majority of people perform well in a crisis; it's on the Sunday afternoons of this life, when nobody is looking, that the spirit falters." *Alan Bennett*
- ✂ "Jazz is the sound of people negotiating change. It's an international language for fusing design, manufacturing, and implementation into one multifaceted process. The tools jazz musicians use embody a tradition based on the principles of alignment, self-initiative, experimentation, and cross-functional understanding – principles that have become imperatives for business in the 21st century." *Michael Gold*
- ✂ "In today's new economy... the minds of gifted people are what truly distinguish one organisation from another," *John Kao*

The business case for diversity

A global study of more than 3 million staff reveals the strong business case for a diverse workforce. Douglas Klein, president of consultancy Sirota, which surveyed the attitudes of its clients' employees, said the research backs many widely-held assumptions.

The research shows that despite people's differences, whether gender, race, or location, all employees seek a similar set of needs to be met - namely, equity with colleagues, their sense of achievement, and camaraderie.

If one of these elements is not met, enthusiasm drops - sometimes markedly. If, for example, people feel unfairly treated, the research shows their enthusiasm falls by 350 per cent.

Merely ensuring a diverse workforce is not enough. Different groups must be embraced and their needs must be met. "A philosophy to include diversity of ideas, people and viewpoints is more powerful than something that lives in [the] labour relations [department]" quotes Klein.

The research also shows that if diversity is embedded in the company culture, it allows people to work co-operatively, enhances management, and boosts creativity and innovation. "Culture matters terribly," Klein says. "If you have a culture of inclusivity, it suggests a longer-term, more sustainable environment for business success." "The greatest management opportunity is around culture - regardless of background."

But beware the tendency to allow diversity to become just a compliance issue: Nick Starritt, managing director of Sirota Europe commenting on the report from a UK context points out that "many HR professionals have heard from colleagues in the US that diversity is a big issue. But in the US - as is likely to happen in the UK - it has been tainted by government mandates,"

"Diversity initiatives can easily be derailed by excesses of quotas and targets. The UK is headed this way unless organisations identify and understand the business benefits behind delivering diversity." The real issue is inclusion, and not merely tracking proportions

Quentin Reade in Personnel Today April 04
<http://www.sirotaeurope.com/>

Training Trends 2004

It seems as though organisations' attitudes to training and development are getting better, but there is still room for improvement, according to the Training Trends 2004 survey carried out among HR Zone members.

The survey found that while 72% described their organisation's attitude to training as generally positive, almost half went on to say that their company's good intentions did not match up to reality. And just 23% said that training and development was an integral part of company strategy.

With 40% of responsibility for training lying with line managers, there are signs that there is an increased need for training professionals to make the business case for training. Over a third of respondents expected return on investment to more important for them in the coming year.

Evaluation is also becoming a bigger issue: 59% said evaluation was becoming more important. The quality of evaluation is still a problem, however, with the feedback form or 'happy sheet' still being the most popular method and only 11% following up how learning had been put into action after three months.

In terms of time for Staff Development, 14% said they offered one-two days per year, 40% offer three-five days, 23% offer six-10 days, and 17% allocate more than 10 days.

Training Trends 2004 HRZone.com

MORE INFORMATION

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