

JAZZ – THE NEW METAPHOR

by Geof Cox,

adapted from *Cuttings* 51, June 2004

One of the Snippets that I collected for the 51st 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 at the US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey) 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. The metaphor of the symphony orchestra is the equivalent of the traditional organisation – groups of specialists contributing to a total goal that the conductor is directing. The sections of the orchestra are the equivalent of the departments of an organisation. The leader of each section is responsible for the specialists in his group, just like the departmental manager. They operate independently of the other sections, producing their specialist part of the output. The conductor is the person with the overall authority to pull the individual parts together to create the symphony. The orchestra cannot do it on its own as there is not the ability to communicate across the stage or hear what other sections are doing. Equally, they are unable to switch jobs across the sections and understand the symphony from a different perspective. They are reliant on someone else making sense of the whole, while they focus on their own specialism.

The symphony orchestra also exhibits other less helpful features for effective organisation. From his experience of working in a symphony orchestra as well as being one of the world’s leading jazz vibraphonists, Gary Burton makes the observation *“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.”* In the

same article for Fast Company magazine¹, he relates an experience of one of his classical friends when she was appearing as a violin soloist with the New York Philharmonic. *“At rehearsal Zubin Mehta was conducting and the players were being incredibly disrespectful. They weren't paying attention, they were talking to each other, listening to the ballgame on the radio. She turned to one of her friends in the orchestra and said, ‘I had no idea things were this bad. ‘ He replied, ‘We're all on good behaviour tonight because you're here.”* Burton's conclusion: *“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.”*

So what is jazz leadership?

Max Deprey in his 1992 book *Leadership Jazz* explains it thus: *“...one way to think about leadership is to consider a jazz band. 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... A jazz band is an expression of servant leadership. The leader of a jazz band has the beautiful opportunity to draw the best out of the other musicians. We have much to learn from jazz-band leaders, for jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals.”*

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.”*

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.

Leadership in the jazz world is all about personal qualities not scientific methodology. It is about challenging, continually listening, encouraging high performance from others, building the future that fits in partnership with all the stakeholders, and being supporting when you are not soloing – and encouraging

¹ Lessons on business from a jazz legend. The Gary Burton Trio, by Michael Schrage, Fast Company, Issue 06, Dec 1996/Jan 1997, Page 110

everyone to take the lead. Getting results in this environment is all about influence, not control.

The creation of Miles Davis's most famous and influential album *Kind of Blue* is an example of what is possible in jazz leadership. Celebrating its 50th birthday in 2009, it is the most commercially successful jazz recording of all time and still sells in large numbers. From a leadership perspective, Davis took some massive risks – he brought together some of the great names in jazz of the time, sat them in a recording studio with no music or rehearsal time, and just encouraged everyone to work together, build on each other's ideas and listen intently to what was being played. His risk taking was rewarded, *Kind of Blue* was recorded in two sessions totalling only eight hours, and most were first takes, despite the fact that the band members had never played together before that day. The spontaneity, lack of preconceived ideas and freshness that Davis created so mirrors what organisations are trying to create in their leadership style that it has become a Harvard University case study in leadership.²

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)]

² *Kind of Blue: Pushing Boundaries with Miles Davis*, Prof. Robert D. Austin and Carl Størmer, reported in HBS Working Knowledge, April 2009

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