

The behaviors of jazz as a catalyst for strategic renewal and growth

Michael Gold and Steve Hirshfeld

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Lucent world headquarters in Murray Hill, New Jersey, called a three-day conference in 1998 to work towards understanding the difficulty they were having managing workforces in cultures different from that of mainstream America. We were asked to present the model of jazz as a way of providing an experiential metaphor for collaborative improvisation in management that the multinational group of managers would be able to draw from over the next several days – ideas and techniques that would help them deal with high velocity change and the extraordinary cultural differences they were encountering in nonwestern markets and work environments of the late 1990s.

The presentation employed the performance of five highly skilled jazz musicians who had never met one another before. Spontaneously improvised jazz was interspersed with explanations about the how and why of what we were doing. The immediate response was an overwhelming onslaught of questions about how we managed to remain so lucid and attentive to one another in a collaborative process that had so few rules and limitations. The electricity of the performance, and the suggestion of the relationship of improvisation to management, stimulated many new thoughts on how old problems of collaborative process could be approached in different ways.

The model of jazz proved highly effective in giving Lucent a way to talk about making the kinds of changes that would grant more flexibility and creative freedom to people. In the debrief session that followed, comments ranged from seeing and understanding the ways our different roles fused together in the rapidly changing process of improvisation to the importance of seeing, hearing and actively listening to the way in which we constantly and spontaneously shifted between leading and supporting one another in our collaborative effort. These managers immediately sensed a connection between the challenges we faced as improvisers working to sustain collaborative innovation in the ambiguous context of the ensemble, and the demands they faced leading their company through chaotically changing conditions in the rapidly emerging markets of the global digital revolution.

The question most frequently asked following that initial performance was “when and where will you be doing this again?” That was all the impetus Michael Gold needed to create the program Jazz Impact, which over the years has evolved as a dynamic program for process innovation and change management.

Since 1998 much has changed in the macro environment surrounding Lucent and other leading corporations. The pace and complexity of change has only intensified and today, all organizations find themselves trying to manage uncertainty. But disruptive change is not new to business or to music. In the world of music, the appearance of jazz was as upsetting to the traditional hierarchy as the ascendancy of Apple, Intel and Microsoft were to the rule of the giants like IBM (and perhaps, in the future, as open source will be to Microsoft). In 2004 Michael Gold and Steve Hirshfeld, a founder of the Managing Uncertainty Strategy Team (MUST) and former Vice President of Corporate Strategy and Business development for

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“What are the best methods available to leaders to orchestrate effective change? How can creativity best be nurtured in a particular organization at a particular juncture?”

Honeywell, began their dialogue about how the jazz metaphor could be extended further into the strategy development and implementation process, as well as serve as a catalyst for organizational change.

Jazz as a metaphor for “scoring” twenty-first century business success

What Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five did in the early 1920s was to fuse the traditionally separated roles of composer, instrumental interpreter and conductor into a new role in the world of music: the role of the improviser. This fusion of roles took the vertical chain of command, in which the composer created the ideas then gave the score to the conductor who single handedly led the regimented orchestra through a very controlled interpretation of those ideas, and turned the process into a horizontal network in which all members bore equal responsibility for the creation, production and delivery of the musical experience. Unlike the completely scripted performance of a symphony, the underlying structure in jazz is a minimal set of boundaries that coordinates the organization in time and purpose, but leaves the responsibility for creative choices up to the individual. A core element in the process of perpetual renewal in jazz is the constant introduction of new ideas and perspectives.

Business in the twenty-first century faces a very similar challenge to its structural identity. Ideas and inventors can be matched over the internet with eBay-like ease through start-ups such as InnoCentive. Small entrepreneurial start-ups can work in collaboration with large companies and universities in loosely connected innovation clusters that propel discovery and offer unprecedented commercial opportunity. It is often the case now that a Silicon Valley start-up company establishes a one- or two-person office in India or China before its “corporate headcount” reaches 20. These dynamic and innovative interactions and organizational approaches must address the same challenges Lucent faced in the Jazz Impact discovery workshop.

So one might say we are in a time of apparent paradox and competing forces and business models. The ability to grow organically from within and through new forms of collaboration is at the top of everyone’s priority list. Companies are focused on finding new ways to tap into the customer in the innovation process, to create new products, to do so faster, and to do so in a more jazz-like manner. IBM has held a series of “World Jam” sessions to engage employees in mass collaboration.

The five behaviors of jazz

How does the jazz ensemble sustain itself night after night, year after year through a constant churn of personnel while maintaining an extremely high level of creative interaction, resulting in a constant stream of new ideas and new processes? There are five behaviors that empower jazz improvisation: passion, listening, autonomy, risk and improvisation. We will discuss each of these behaviors as they relate to both the art of jazz and the conduct of business. Then we’ll examine several case studies involving the integration of the behaviors of jazz into specific corporate cultures.

Passion

One of the fundamental drivers of jazz has always been passion, feeding the constant renewal of the ensemble’s emotional commitment to the creative process. Passion is at the core of what is called swing – the perpetual motion that drives collaborative thinking and

invention in jazz. One of Duke Ellington's most famous compositions is entitled, *It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing*. Given that Duke was in many respects the Peter Drucker of the jazz world, it was, in essence, a directive to his musicians that if the passion for constant invention wasn't there, it mattered not what level of expertise they were bringing to the table. In the realtime process of jazz, clarity and economy of ideas are critical to the rapid integration of diverse styles and approaches. The fusion of passion and expertise can best be achieved when one is able to simplify even the most complex ideas – no easy task in any medium. Passion serves to connect and catalyze important shifts in process that may be unfamiliar or discontinuous.

In jazz, we cannot separate what a person knows from how a person acts. The same situation pertains in a business environment where there is a constant need for creative interpretation and collaborative problem solving. So often in business, however, we prioritize expertise over passion and belief in purposeful visions. If we place passion low on the list of priorities, thinking of it as a separate entity from the creative expertise we demand from ourselves and our employees, we will soon find that the very core of the organization – its energy, its spirit for the process – has dissipated. Passion for collaborative improvisation becomes a critical resource for strategic renewal.

To swing as an individual and as an organization requires a balance between expertise and passion such that one never loses the connection to the other. They continuously renew each other as externalities change and their form of response, be it anticipatory or reactive, drives new strategies and behaviors. This dynamic is delicate. As jazz musicians, we cannot "make" it swing; we can only "let" it swing. The most important behavior in this dynamic is the act of listening.

Listening

In high performance jazz improvisation, everything begins with the act of listening. The ability to spontaneously shift back and forth between the dual roles of soloing (leading) and supporting is the core behavior that enables great jazz. Everyone is given the responsibility of soloing and the opportunity to develop original ideas. But it really is the act of support – "comping," short for accompanying – that makes jazz so unique among art forms. Comping is a form of interactive listening that requires musicians to identify with the soloist's ideas at a very deep level in order to facilitate their process without hindering it. This is called empathic listening. It is the ability to suspend any assumption about what is coming next in order to allow whatever it is that emerges to evolve in the direction that it needs to go; it is the ability to listen with an open mind and no predetermined agenda.

Capturing this behavior in a business context, where action is value and listening and observation are often viewed as "non-value added," is vital but not easy. Why is this important? Empathic listening is a tool for creating a dynamic of leaders and supporters rather than one of leaders and followers.

As important as empathic listening is, it also poses a serious challenge to the vertical hierarchies of most corporate cultures. To listen empathically means to approach each interaction from a perspective that good ideas can and will come from all levels of the organization regardless of position in hierarchy, or from outside the confines of the company itself.

For example, Procter & Gamble, through its "Connect and Develop" initiative, described in the June 8, 2005 *Financial Times*, has set a goal of 50 percent of its new product ideas coming from outside the company; it has 50 technology searchers scanning the radar for new ideas and innovations to supplement its own endeavors. P&G is a leading advocate for open innovation. It also has its own "consumer village" with a "supermarket" and kitchen where consumers come in to shop or use its various products. Trained people observe and learn from consumer selections and insights as a major source of new ideas from products to processes to packaging and promotion. It expands its core brands by serving broader consumer needs and growing, for example, from a leader in toothpaste and toothbrushes to

“share of mouth” through whiteners and spinbrushes, often capitalizing on technology and processes from other businesses.

Autonomy

In jazz, autonomy has always been defined as an act of sharing. Autonomy in jazz means having the freedom to take whatever action may be needed in the moment to achieve a particular goal, but at the same time having the responsibility and the awareness to assure that the integrity of one's own ideas as well as the integrity of the other's ideas is not compromised. What looks like magic to the laymen as they observe jazz musicians spontaneously creating new ideas is actually a very highly structured process of interaction that fosters successful collaboration, requiring trust and a very high level of cross-functional understanding. Above all, autonomy in jazz has always been defined as an act of sharing, in the context of empowerment.

Business in the twenty-first century is like a highly skilled orchestra that has suddenly had its conductor and its scores removed – immense expertise but very little empowerment for self actualization. The only way forward is through interactive creative collaboration – what is known as open source innovation. There can be no such thing as one's success at the expense of another's, because when everything is interconnected such an approach is self destructive. In this context, autonomy must be based on the principal of inclusivity.

Reuters created an internal venture capital activity to nurture start ups and called it the Reuters Greenhouse. They commission projects from small companies. Instead of telling the start-ups what to do, the Greenhouse observes and follows them, in essence allowing creative autonomy before translating the new ideas into what is comfortable for Reuters' core business. The Greenhouse then determines how to introduce the new ideas into the larger organization in an incremental manner that allows adjustments and is minimally disruptive.

Success in both jazz and in business depends on the ability to create organizations where the structured hierarchy, roles and rules serve the development of ideas and the people creating them – not the other way around.

Improvisation

The challenge to people trying to sustain innovative collaboration in both jazz and business is improvisational – the immediate absorption and rapid integration of new and different ideas. Principles of improvisation include:

- acceptance of a new idea or approach with an attitude of “yes and;”
- attentive listening to the partners with whom one is co-creating;
- temporary suspension of critical judgment while in the option-finding mode;
- an attitude of relaxed openness to new ideas, moving further into the realm of imagination;
- reframing situations to explore creative possibilities;
- a willingness to take chances and to risk making mistakes; and
- an understanding that no choice is absolutely right or wrong and this can only be discovered through trial and error.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter describes improvisational strategy as experimenting in areas of uncertainty, moving fast and learning through action, creating new possibilities, integrating the audience as a source of input and creative energy, and relying more on empowered

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actors closer to the audience than decrees from above (*European Business Forum*, Issue 8, Winter 2001/02).

In *What To Listen for in Jazz* (Yale University Press, 1997), Barry Kornfield quotes bassist Chuck Israels as saying, “musical decisions that take place during improvisation are made instantly, but the work behind those decisions takes place over long periods of time – hours, days, weeks, months and years – spent considering all the musical possibilities.” Exploration in jazz implies the careful exploitation of the capital one has built through hard work in the pursuit of continual learning.

Successful collaborative improvisation is directly linked to the level of permission that a group is able to confer on itself – permission to explore and make mistakes. Improvisation is not possible in an environment where there is fear of failure. For the jazz improviser, the act of doing cannot be separated from the process of transformation. Jazz is essentially a learning culture whose existence depends on the continual transformation of each of its constituents, expressed through improvisation. In the 1996 book *The Leader of the Future*, Peter Senge addressed this for business: “The basic assumption that only top management can cause significant change is deeply disempowering. Why then in the ‘age of empowerment,’ do we accept it so unquestioningly? Isn’t it odd that we would seek to bring about less hierarchical and authoritarian organizational cultures through recourse to hierarchical authority?”

Risk taking

Jazz recordings are, in a sense, oxymoronic in nature because they capture, in a static way, an art form whose entire purpose is the continuous evolution of the interactive creative process. A jazz recording might be likened to an annual report reflecting everything that happened in a very successful year, but to appreciate the true nature of jazz, it has to be experienced live in performance. The driving force behind a century of evolution in jazz is its ability to move beyond the pull of its past success, to constantly resist the temptation to fall back on what has worked in the past – in other words, to take risks. Success in both business and jazz requires constant movement into uncharted territory, rather than trying to adhere to the ideas that earned success in the past.

This is not to imply that jazz musicians ignore past success. Their challenge is to create flexible strategies that build on but go beyond what’s worked in the past. Accomplishing this requires acceptance of a level of uncertainty and risk that lies well beyond the typical corporate comfort zone and a better understanding of the larger dynamic environment and context in which the business operates. What is often forgotten by business leaders is that inaction in many situations is the most risky alternative of all.

The next section contains examples of companies that have used the jazz metaphor and the five behaviors to address changing needs in their markets and to move their organizations toward the next level of success. These behaviors become much easier to remember when thought of as the acronym APRIL: Autonomy, Passion, Risk taking, Improvisation and Listening.

Fenwick & West

The goal of Fenwick & West, a Silicon Valley-centered intellectual property law firm, was to renew the human aspects of their employees’ interrelationships. For example, it wanted to

help its attorneys recognize that non-technical matters are vital to the success of the overall organization and, while technical personnel and support staff may work separately from each other around particular projects, there is a great deal they can learn from each other, and transferring those insights can strengthen the entire organization. Their focus was on developing teamwork in ways that went beyond the traditional methodology applied by most organizational development facilitators.

Without an experiential activity the employees could not understand the “logic” of what the Fenwick & West leadership was trying to introduce into the firm. The challenge was to help patent attorneys and scientists to recognize how art and jazz, in particular, can be a powerful tool capable of helping them become more responsive to their clients’ needs.

Jazz Impact worked with Fenwick & West to come up with an integrated set of experiences for the 250 attendees that would demand their creative participation even at the planning stage. Each individual was asked to spend some time in advance creating their own rhythm instruments. We sent them each an email with the following directive:

Rhythm Band. You will need to create (or purchase) and bring your own rhythm instrument to the workshop. If your birthday falls in winter, bring #1 below. Spring, #2; Summer, #3, and Fall, #4.

1. **Shakers. Containers:** Plastic jars, film canisters, wooden and metal containers, smaller sized coffee cans with a plastic lid (can be used for shakers, scrapers, and drums all at once). **Filler:** beads from a hobby store, copper-jacketed lead shot, dried beans, or popcorn (unpopped!).
2. **Rhythm Sticks and woodblocks:** The harder the wood the better.
3. **Scrapers:** A length of PVC pipe works great, or take a piece of bamboo 25-30 cm long, and the thicker the better. Make sawcuts along one side of it, about 1 cm apart, then use a rasp or a file to make the cuts into more of a “V” shape. Hold it in one hand and scrape it with a chopstick, stick or piece of wire.
4. **Cowbells:** You need something to produce a muffled “clank” rather than a ringing bell tone. Try some stainless steel mixing bowls at a thrift shop.

This was the only clue people had about what the day would hold for them. We offered detailed instructions to assure that their instruments would be satisfactory and to give them a sense of how thoroughly we had planned their activity. For our ideas to receive a proper reception, our seriousness of intent had to be clear.

We began at 9.00 a.m. on Saturday with the 70-minute seminar that presented the five APRIL behavioral concepts outlined above, interspersed with musical demonstrations of these behaviors. When the seminar finished, they broke off into teams, went out into the surrounding community of Monterey, California, and worked on assigned tasks that involved finding and using resources to create specific scenarios for presentation to the entire group later in the day. The assignments were loosely structured with certain minimal guidelines (one of the main precepts in jazz). Each team was given tools such as VCRs or sound recording devices. The teams were charged with finding resources and coming up with their own ideas, in real time, rehearsing them and presenting – a sort of cross between the work of a trial lawyer and the work of a jazz musician. Throughout this part of the process, the concepts we had just presented acted as a guide when teams encountered creative friction or faced difficult choices that threatened to take up valuable time needed to prepare the presentation.

Fenwick & West people were so used to working and thinking within the highly structured hierarchy of the firm that they needed a model to give them permission to improvise, and to develop a context where each individual’s contribution was paramount, regardless of whether they worked as a receptionist or as a senior partner. Jazz springs from a dynamic of leading and support (rather than leading and following), actualized through constant rotation in which the leadership role is shared by all members. This was a key point made during the seminar and one the participants were urged to practice in the ensuing exercises.

Once the four-hour preparation period was complete, each team had ten minutes to present to the group. The presentations were characterized by an unusual level of enthusiasm, particularly because most of the participants had never before performed under such

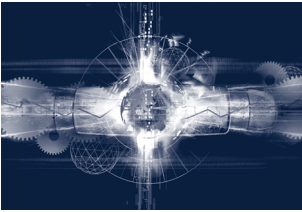
circumstances. Many stated they would never forget the feeling of authenticity and energy they experienced while presenting original ideas they had just created.

Early that evening, the Jazz Impact ensemble came back and presented a one-hour concert. This was an opportunity for the participants to hear the world class musicians they had worked with earlier give it their all; an opportunity that most people could only have by visiting such famous jazz clubs as The Village Vanguard or The Blue Note. The purpose was to build a higher level to give the participants a chance to experience world-class jazz improvisation from a new position of understanding of both the music and of how the dynamics at work on stage might apply to their own lives.

Following dinner, the group was reassembled and the interactive portion of the day began. Participants were asked to bring their rhythm instruments. Working with our vocalist, Brian Tate, the group was divided into four sections. We began teaching, in real time, very simple yet highly swinging four-part pieces to the group. Participation was mandatory. For the next hour everyone created their own music, using rhythm and voice, to the accompaniment of the ensemble and under our facilitation. Very few of these people had any musical training, yet by 15 minutes into the process, everyone was engaged in the challenge.

Our intention was to involve the participants in the behaviors of organized improvisation at the intellectual, physical and emotional levels, and to steep them in the experience in a way that would hold. This was about Fenwick & West learning to literally swing together. Over the hour, our entire group performance ranged from learning to sing four-part simple jazz mantras to improvising a symphony with the instruments they had created.

Ralph Pais, a senior partner in the firm, stated that “The use of music was highly effective in translating fascinating concepts from another world that have relevant application in ours.” Two months later, Pais reported that the experience of the evening’s interactive activity had driven the behaviors of jazz deeply into the organizational consciousness – employees were still referring to them on a daily basis. Pais also stated that one of the most valuable takeaways for them was an organizational understanding of how to approach the hard work of integrating structure and creativity without compromising either.



McGraw-Hill

Jazz Impact’s work for McGraw-Hill was predicated on their need to translate their successful twentieth-century operating process into a form that would yield the same success in a world where culture, distance and time no longer act as barriers. Jazz Impact engaged 45 of their top executives involved in sales and marketing, creative development, human resources and strategic planning, in a 90-minute session that included and allowed for questions and discussion.

In planning for the program we worked closely with Chuck Presbury, senior director of Leadership Development at McGraw-Hill. We determined that two specific jazz behaviors – empathic listening and passion – would be most relevant in terms of their overall learning for the three-day seminar.

For empathic listening, we developed an exercise where each person would pair off to work on the ability to listen to something with no agenda or preconceived expectation. The exercise worked like this: a piece of music was played by the ensemble, in this instance it was a rendition of *A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing*, a spectacular ballad written by Billy Strayhorn, Duke Ellington’s protégé. It was played by our trombonist Art Baron, who played with the Ellington band in the early 1970s – quite an evocative performance. When the piece finished, one person was to describe to the other what it was they had heard. As they described their listening experience, they were to trust that the listener was deeply interested in what they were saying. The listener in turn was to try and notice what prejudice or agenda they were bringing to the act of listening. If they could identify any, they were to do their best to suspend those assumptions or expectations in order to really understand the reality the other was reporting.

The participants were astounded at the differences in perception that each reported to the other, and quickly made the connection between this type of listening and the skills needed to achieve market penetration in cultures different from our own, particularly nonwestern cultures.

The experience spurred discussion on how easy it is to make erroneous assumptions about another's intent or meaning by letting our own assumptions interfere with our perceptions. Although this all may sound quite obvious, people rarely stop to examine how they listen and how their listening may differ from others. The learning had multifaceted applications.

We also engaged the executives in an interactive four-part singing exercise. Initially there was a great reluctance to commit to such an activity due to inhibitions and cultural protocols regarding appropriate corporate behavior. But, after a few people volunteered to take on the individual parts, the entire group soon sided with one of the four instruments to participate in the exercise. All that was required to make it work was the willingness to take a risk and the passion to carry it out.

We discussed the critical importance of passion in the cultural transition that McGraw-Hill is attempting to make – to grow beyond the success the company has achieved with its existing products in tried-and-true markets, by penetrating new, culturally diverse markets where new products will need to be invented or existing ones retooled. Such a transition will require change, risk and the possibility of failure, such that a very high level of anxiety and fear cannot be avoided.

Through the process of jazz, we were able to demonstrate a “new idea process” that gave the executives a model for envisioning their – and their company's – transformation. The role of passion as a driver for these functions was clear. In discussion, the point was made that in both jazz and in business, passion is how we overcome the fear of error in order to focus on real work.

A further point was made during discussion. In jazz the creative hierarchy is horizontal, resulting in a level of ownership and responsibility that would be impossible in the typical vertical chain of command that was such a strong part of McGraw-Hill's cultural history. This aspect of jazz behavior was very productive for the executives in coming to terms with the broad changes they need to make to this aspect of their culture.

Jazz Impact was able to convey the idea that real innovation comes through constant strategic renewal, which is in fact the very process of collaborative jazz improvisation. The forces at work in jazz are the forces needed to establish business cultures capable of organizational improvisation.

- *Discovery*: leveraging the creative potential of every individual in your organization at every level of hierarchy.
- *Interpretation*: understanding and embracing diverse ways of thinking so that you never miss valuable connections.
- *Integration*: building relationships able to work with the uncertainty and ambiguity that are part of the problem-solving process in any global business.

These are the behaviors of jazz, and also the tools for organizational development, value-added growth and competitive differentiation in business.

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