



Executive Briefings

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Where Business Meets Jazz

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Born in a different time, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane and Miles Davis might have been known as the most successful corporate leaders in America instead of the most well-known jazz musicians. Why? Because of the incredible overlap between the worlds of jazz and business. The elements that make a jazz group phenomenal are similar to those that make companies great.

Michael Gold, who has a Ph.D. in performance, brings the sounds of saxophones, trombones and basses to corporations to show them how a business should operate more like a jazz ensemble, fusing business with art.

“We’re trying to create an experience that people have which goes deep. The whole premise of using art as a tool in education for business is that if you use it in the right way, you can drive the experience to a deep enough level so that it is accessible to them [participants] in their everyday functioning,” said Gold, who is a jazz bassist but has also worked in the corporate realm.

His corporate program, Jazz Impact, involves top jazz musicians coming together to play before employees and teach them how their companies should operate more like a jazz ensemble. Gold shows businesses what makes a jazz group successful: autonomy, passion, risk, innovation and listening (APRIL). Coincidentally, these concepts are the foundation of a good business.

In jazz, leadership means nothing without the underpinnings of support. Similarly, executive leaders must empower their employees and develop a cooperative environment with an intellectual give-and-take between employees and their bosses.

“For most of the 20th century, the idea of autonomy was you win, they lose. That’s how you did it in business. Well, that doesn’t work anymore, and in jazz, it never did. The idea of autonomy in jazz is based completely in a mindset of inclusion, and that’s because, in the jazz ensemble, we are constantly transitioning back and forth between a position of leadership and a position of support. The leadership actually makes it possible, through the way they relate, to be instantly influenced by the reaction of the supporting team,” he said.

“It’s a subtle point, and yet something that is very relevant in business. The real resource in a company is its intellectual capital. So the autonomy that we’re demonstrating in the jazz ensemble is something that top managers really strive to achieve, which is wanting people to take the initiative at all levels and to be accountable for their actions.”

Businesses need to cultivate passion in their employees. When employees believe in the integrity of their company, they feel an emotional commitment that affects their success.

“In jazz and in business, it’s the passion of emotional commitment that gets you through all the very difficult work that has to be done. It actually forms a renewable resource because, if people feel a sense of authenticity about their corporate culture, that’s going to generate passion, and when they have passion for what they do, they’re going to feel a sense of authenticity,” he said.

Jazz is about interpretation and improvisation. The artists loosely use the framework of a known musical piece to develop music that is altogether different. As a result, the musicians are forced to take risks.

“Risk has never been an option in jazz. We are constantly faced with the risk of innovation, of having to come up with our own musical ideas in real time and in collaboration with each other. That really strikes a chord with a lot of companies because they realize: ‘Wow, that really is what’s happening to us everyday,’” Gold said. “We have to come in every day and reinvent ourselves in some way. So how do you get people to do that? [In jazz], we are actually composing together in real time. We’re minimizing the structure. We’re taking only what’s essential to coordinate us in time and intention. We’re letting go of all of the other rules and the things that keep us from changing, without losing our coherence and our coordination together.”

Gold has developed interactive activities that get corporate employees and leaders to take risks such as having a small group of participants sing big-band style songs.

“Most people are thinking, ‘I can’t do this,’ and they do. It’s a way of getting people to experience what it’s like to blend their individual part with four other parts,” he said. “It puts them in a situation of uncertainty, and it allows them to take a risk with each other and to try to be very cognizant of what the other people are doing in order to create something that’s coherent. It’s more of an experience that they never forget about: how they were able to be with that discomfort and still think creatively.”

As innovation is part of what makes good jazz music, it’s also part of what makes a company successful.

“The idea of innovation in APRIL is sort of a way to bring together all of the other dynamics and show [that] when they are used in this effort to improvise, they [create] a better result,” Gold said.

Lastly, the ability to listen to employees is essential to any organization’s success in the same way it’s vital for a jazz player to listen to his counterparts. Because jazz musicians are constantly

developing new music, the bassist has to listen keenly to what the pianist is playing for the music to be good.

“What’s going on in jazz is a process called creative destruction, and what that means is extracting the core value from an old idea and reinventing it in ever-changing new context. The idea of creative destruction requires that people are able to listen in a very unique way,” Gold said. “They’ve got to understand that most of what we hear and see, we subconsciously relate back to things we already know about, and in business what that is most directly correlated to is past success. We’ve got to be able to listen beyond that comfort zone of our past success.”

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