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Diversity, Innovation, and Jazz: Beyond Black and White

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Diversity is more than simply collecting a group of employees with various backgrounds...it's putting those differences to work. Many companies today tout workforces that are rich mosaics of backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values and beliefs while failing to leverage these assets to their fullest extent. Never before has a model for diversity been as needed as it is in today's highly competitive workforce. It's time to leave the office...and head to the jazz club.

The jazz ensemble serves as a working model of the dynamics of a diverse group of people whose purpose is to understand, generate and communicate knowledge between one another. This process of jazz produces a sustainable flow of innovation, collaboration and interdependence at both the individual level and as a group. It draws on experience, knowledge and wisdom generated by the players and serves as a model – an analogy – for the kind of purposeful, diversity-centered interaction that can transform organizations societies and cultures.

DIVERSITY AT THE LEVEL OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Diversity is a constantly changing, evolving organizational asset. Management paradigms of just a few years ago are obsolete with regard to leveraging a multicultural workforce... telling us very little about how to engage the creative yet dormant energy currently residing in our present organizations. Jazz, as a model for the integration of diversity, offers a dynamic language as rich and varied as the matrix of ideas, perspectives and cultural influences that we assembled daily in organizations.

Innovation is more than the sum of its parts. It requires that each individual work in the aggregate toward a common goal, while at the same time applying a unique perspective and insight. This balance between a collective objective and autonomous contribution is not only the backbone of a successful organization...it is the essence of Jazz.

The link between jazz and diversity was explored in depth during an engagement as keynote program during the Massachusetts Port Authority's 2007 Diversity Conference. The lessons learned during this program can be extrapolated and applied to virtually any organization seeking to mobilize and realize the potential of its multicultural workforce. Some of the key points covered in that program follow.

MASSPORT SWINGS

The tradition of jazz embodies the practice of collective improvisation... discovering, interpreting and actualizing new ideas in real time and in collaboration with one another.

The term improvisation is frightening to many because it implies uncertainty, chaos and unexpected results. In the world of jazz, however, it means just the opposite. Improvisation in jazz – and in good workforces – means collaboratively achieving breakthrough results by leveraging the creative, intellectual and psychic energy of each member of the organization to benefit the whole

A good jazz ensemble has a set of interactive dynamics and collective awareness critical to the ecology of a diverse workplace. Perhaps the most important organizational dimension of the jazz ensemble is the shared understanding between leading and supporting roles that are needed for collective growth.

There are certain basic conditions that must exist in order for an ensemble to make best use of the dynamic, creative potential of its members...whether the ensemble is a jazz quartet or a corporate team. They are:

- Fostering an inclusive mindset in which people understand the broader implication of their roles and the choices they make
- Linking the emotional commitment of each individual to "the bottom line"
- Providing clear but minimal guidelines that keep everyone focused on the same goal without sacrificing autonomy
- Promoting listening as a powerful tool for proactive response to change.

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SEARCHING OUT MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

What makes jazz possible, sustainable and capable of producing a compelling outcome is its reliance on diverse talents and skills to create harmony. In music as in business, multiple viewpoints should be deemed essential, not dismissed as burdensome. There is little to be gained by gathering a diverse group of people only to shackle their differences in an attempt at homogeneity. This sort of "respectful compromise" only serves to inhibit the bottom line and the organization itself. It is also a mindset that jazz emphatically rejects. Inclusion means valuing personal differences, not quashing them. The goal is not to avoid differences, but to learn from them and use that knowledge to foster innovation.

To move things forward effectively, organizational leaders must ask the following questions of themselves:

- How do you allow for new ways of thinking unless you perceive yourself as diverse?
- How does an inclusive work environment really work?
- As a leader how do I foster such an environment?
- How do I support leadership in order to foster such an environment?
- How do I listen and what does it really mean to be open and receptive to viewpoints and perspectives that are different from my own?

THE ART OF LISTENING

While listening to the ensemble perform, we asked people to pay careful attention to how highly skilled musicians were able to create music spontaneously without the traditional structures of scores, conductors and all the protocols that typify classical music. The implicit request was for the audience to focus on how they can "create music"...harmony...while functioning within traditional business structure.

We discussed the importance of specific competencies and their relevance to the issues they were considering. Foremost is ability to transition spontaneously between leading others and supporting others. This dynamic in jazz is clearly demonstrated through two basic roles that each musician has to master: soloing and comping. Soloing in jazz means being given the opportunity to take the lead in developing your own ideas as you adhere to an underlying harmonic strategy that everyone understands. Comping is the role the rest of the ensemble plays to support the soloist. Comping is a very challenging skill that requires adhering to the underlying structure but at the same time accommodating the risks that the soloist takes while exploring that structure for new ideas.

The heart of the process of innovation in jazz (and in organizations) lies in balancing the soloist's search for something new with the rhythm section's (comper's) support. It is a process that requires continual give and take; an assessment and consensus about what's new, what's worked in the past, and how new ground can constantly be reached.

There were two key lessons that came from our session in Boston:

- Even in highly structured environments, a high degree of autonomy is fundamental to innovation.
- At the core of the ensemble's process is the ability to listen empathically.

The term empathic listening is actually taken from the management lexicon and refers to the ability to assume the role and perspective of the customer.

Empathic listening in jazz is how we integrate the new with the old. It's how we are able to bridge the gap between the underlying strategy and the need to be flexible enough to support and integrate the soloists' ideas. Ultimately, striking the balance between structure and fluidity expands our capacity to generate new ideas from an underlying strategy.

INTERACTIVE AUTONOMY – AND THE CHALLENGE OF WHAT LIES AHEAD

At the MASSPORT meeting, we characterized this relationship as one of interactive autonomy – one in which each person's efforts are integrally tied to those of each of the others – essentially a blending of individual intention and behavior with group intention and behavior.

At certain points in the program we invited the audience to participate in experiential exercises that involved blending different rhythms and vocal sounds in order to achieve a syncopated whole. This challenge gave the participants an experience that they could personalize and translate into amplifying organizational effectiveness.

The business world has much to learn from a successful jazz quartet. In both worlds, success is dictated not by diluting individual talents and skills, but by structuring them to achieve a common goal. A diverse workforce is, in effect, a large jazz ensemble. Organizations that do not provide a unique role for each instrument will create cacophony.

Those that do will make music.

Michael Gold is the founder and principal of Jazz Impact, where he develops and conducts interactive seminars that reinforce teambuilding, problem solving, and other management skills by drawing on the lessons of jazz. He has held various senior management positions in the real estate and financial services industries, holds a Ph.D. in music, and created and ran Vassar College's first jazz program. For more information, please visit www.jazz-impact.com.

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