

Jazzin' CEO*January 09, 2008*

What a CEO can learn from a jazz bassist

By Michael Gold, Ph.D.

A saxophone wielding cool cat jazz act and a boardroom of CEOs seem at first to have nothing in common. But these musicians can help your executives strike just the right chord for your company.

Art and business are surprisingly similar bedfellows. Improvisational theater has been used to teach interactive skills. Great literature has helped doctors "read" each patient's unique narrative, and develop their bedside manner. The symphony orchestra has galvanized and motivated leadership since Peter Drucker referenced its dynamics and design over 40 years ago. Yet as the business world evolves, so must the art forms that inform it.

The new model for business and leadership is the jazz ensemble.

Jazz as a guide for team development? A decade ago it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to recognize the link between these two seemingly disparate worlds, raising eyebrows even in the most progressive MBA programs and companies. More often than not, jazz was experienced as a form of entertainment outside the office, a welcome distraction from the daily grind. But even a cursory study of what makes a successful jazz quartet reveals a deep link with the fundamental components of a productive business team.

The idiom of jazz emerged early in the 20th century, introducing a concept I refer to as "interactive autonomy." This is a dynamic that combines the entrepreneurial spirit—the very core of capitalist philosophy—with the understanding that one's true potential can only be realized when it is applied to an inclusive, common goal. In its earliest incarnations, jazz integrated cultures and nationalities that had never before been fused. The history of jazz was characterized by a rapid cycle of evolution that produced a myriad of styles and genres, but the basic principles have remained consistent from the first recordings of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five. Then and now, the success of small group ensembles rests on the ability to be agile and flexible, skills that are equally central to today's business world. The similarities don't end there:

- Jazz and business require the ability to multitask, exhibit cross-functional awareness, and develop innovative responses to change.
- The jazz and business worlds require partnering and seamless integration of roles.
- Both jazz and business require the courage to create, the vision to imagine new possibilities, and the strength, skill, and tenacity to make those possibilities real.
- Jazz and business both practice a process of constant innovation—known as "creative destruction," a phrase coined by economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1942 to describe the transformational process of radical innovation. It means extracting core values from successful past initiatives, and using them to reinvent the idea, and execute in constantly changing contexts.

There are five dynamics to every successful performance of a jazz ensemble. I call these five dynamics APRIL: Autonomy, Passion, Risk, Innovation, and Listening.

• **Autonomy:** True autonomy depends on the equity of each party concerned. Leadership is no longer a static position. One is dependent on the ability to respond to changing needs, and delegate to others based on their areas of expertise. Each team member must transition between roles of leadership and support, never taking center stage for too long, never hiding behind others when it's their turn to shine.

• **Passion:** We are motivated by feelings and by authenticity. When we believe what we are doing is important, and has a purpose larger than ourselves, we develop passion organically from within. All too often, businesses attempt to instill passion in others through external triggers that quash the spirit rather than kindle it. Emotional commitment—

which still eludes much of the corporate world—is central to a committed, productive team.

- **Risk:** progress is impossible without a willingness to take chances, and we accept that no course of action (or inaction) is ever truly "risk-free." Risk is not an option in jazz or for any company that wants to be solvent ten years from now. This is where creative destruction comes in—providing a structure for taking on and accepting risk while at the same time providing the flexibility needed for quick, innovative responses to change.

- **Innovation:** This is not a "what," but a "how." It is the result of a creative process that involves both "leadership" and "followership" – a process that delivers both support and safety, and rejects comfort and complacency. Innovation also is a function of creative destruction- applying lessons from the past in new, progressive ways to answer challenges and leverage opportunities.

- **Listening.** This is a tool for moving through the discomfort of uncertainty. When we truly listen, we suspend assumptions, expectations, and agendas we may have created to protect ourselves from change. We choose to disengage from any unsupportive internal dialogues; letting go of the false security of past successes and facing obstacles head on.

These dynamics are no longer specific only to jazz. They are applicable to any company attempting to answer the following questions on a daily basis:

- How can we be sure our business thrives and survives in the months and years ahead?
- What's the best way to stay close to our customers, build powerful emotional connections with them, and win repeat business?
- How can we stay ahead of the competition by building, supporting, and sustaining a profitable culture of innovation?
- What can we do to prepare intelligently for the changes—both predictable and unpredictable—that lie ahead?
- What's our best response, as a team, to the trend of globalization?
- Why does it seem like standard business cycles, and the certainty of customer loyalty, have vanished, and what should we do about it?
- Why has the traditional "hierarchy system" become so unproductive, and what should take its place?

Forward-thinking executives have integrated the fundamentals of APRIL into their day-to-day operations without even knowing it. In the past, those who realized business is more an art form than a science benefited exponentially from the lessons inherent in theater, literature and music. Today's business leaders would do well to understand that jazz is more than one of our country's most outstanding contributions to the global culture of music. Jazz is a revolutionary social process that can be leveraged to teach organizations the skills of collaborative, proactive response to change in a world that demands perpetual innovation.

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.