

Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz

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- Karl Weick: Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis: Organizations consist of a group of diverse specialists who, under great duress, make fast, irreversible decisions, are highly interdependent, are dedicated to creation and novelty, and act with little certainty where it's all going to end up.
- Students and teachers can be collaborative witnesses and catalysts. Together, we can bring new, unanticipated elements into the conversation, riffs that deepen our mutual experience and knowledge.
- Studies of jazz have shown that the art is very complex, the result of a relentless pursuit of learning and disciplined imagination.
- Any plan will work in unfamiliar situations, because it will turn you into a learner by helping you take action and venture forth into the unknown mindfully. Act first "as if" this will work; pay attention to what shows up; venture forth; make sense later.
- Stay fully engaged in the details and in the aggregate. That is great jazz in a nutshell.
- Reject habitual behavior and a predictable outcome in favor of experimentation and progress.
- Unlike other art forms and other forms of organized activity that attempt to rely on a pre-developed plan, improvisation is widely open to transformation, redirection and unprecedented turns.
- Given the possibility of disorientation and miscalculations, players must be able to rely on one another to adjust, to amend direction. "When the beat got turned around, it went for about 8 bars. In such a case, someone has to lay out. You can't fight it."
- Rather than saying yes to the mess, people cut short the discovery process, stop learning, and fail to notice opportunities.
- Jazz improvisers focus on discovery in times of stress. They know how to ensure that they do not get stuck in old habits even when reliable routines might seem like the quickest way to relieve anxiety.
- The mere fact that others have positive expectations for our performance can shape outcomes.
- The anticipation of a good performance, the expectation of competency, sets up a self-reinforcing loop between the manager and employee as they co-shape one another's behavior.
- Start by asking positive questions; foster dialogues, not monologues; and you can change the whole situation, maybe even your life.
- Failure is an inevitable part of risk and experimentation.
- Jazz musicians assume that you can take any bad situation and make it into a good situation.
- Too often, managers create monuments to organizational breakdowns by exhaustively searching for causes and by framing mistakes as unacceptable. Rather than encouraging brave experiments outside the margins, they immobilize the very people they are counting on to move the enterprise forward.
- Imagine a standard for organizational evaluation that assessed performances not just on conventional standards of success, but on strength of effort; level of purposeful, committed engagement in an activity; perseverance after an error has been made; and passionate attempts to expand the horizon of what had been considered possible.

- The biggest obstacle to creating the psychological safety that allows people to learn from mistakes is a hierarchy.
- The best jazz players court disaster. They actively pursue not control, but its opposite – that moment of surrender to the music and all its possibilities, good and bad, when nothing is left of you but a purposeless tension.
- To become a full human being, Kierkegaard believed, we must commit to action, practice new skills, and put ourselves at risk of public failure. Only through such full engagement is a meaningful life possible.
- Actors need constraints of character and situation in order to meaningfully improvise. Improvisation, in short, needs rules and some kind of order.
- Jazz bands are very much human systems living at the edge of chaos. To understand their social complexity requires cultivating an aesthetic that values surrender and wonderment over certainty, appreciation over problem solving, listening and attunement over individual isolation.
- Systems are most creative when they operate with a combination of order and chaos.
- Jazz works because the process is designed around small patterns, minimal structures that allow freedom to embellish – a system that balances between the extremes of too much autonomy and too much consensus. So often we hear that good leadership involves creating consensus for how to proceed. One way to think about jazz is that it minimizes consensus around core patterns and allows diversity to flourish. When jazz bands are jamming, creativity is enhanced precisely because emphasis has been placed on coordinating action with consensus disclosure, and structures, all reduced to the simplest levels. Modest structures value ambiguity of meaning over clarity, and preserve indeterminacy and paradox over excessive disclosure. These minimal commonalities are the simple resources that allow players to elaborate in complex ways, balancing autonomy and interdependence.
- By defining the chordal movement, the bass player allows the pianist to play what are referred to as “harmonic substitutions,” not the standard, predefined chords.
- Three components of minimal structure of songs allow jazz players to coordinate
 - Jazz musicians work within clear, non-personal constraints, that is, they do not require interpersonal trusts.
 - Players engage in lots of interaction and communication around these minimal patterns. They share ongoing information and adjust to what they hear. People persevere, trade motifs, engage in spirited exchanges, and support one another to take off and embellish in one or more direction within the framework of the small rules.
 - The constraining patterns are punctuated, occur at regular intervals, and follow a temporal rhythm. Coordination is made possible because of the punctuated coming together that allows a going apart, convergence and divergence. In between these check-ins, everyone is able to embellish and branch off in unpredictable directions, in search of fresh meanings.
- Weick: One organizational equivalent of minimal structure: credos, visions, slogans mission statements, and trademarks.
- There can be too much clarity in organizations. Excessive specification of requirements and expectations can limit an employee’s imagination and thus capacity to respond in the moment.
- Too much consensus is just as dangerous as too little. The trick is to have enough agreement through time so that individuals and groups are free to embellish, branch out, and do something wild and creative, knowing how and where others are oriented.

- Too often in organizations leaders think that if they get the three Rs. Clear – rules, roles, and responsibilities – innovation will logically follow. More often than not, results go in the opposite direction.
- When supervisors get involved, they bring expertise and extra hands, not autonomy-squelching structure.
- Lev Vygotsky: social interaction plays a major role in cognition. We internalize the external voices of others that we hear around us, and this becomes part of our thought process. Relational exchanges precede cognitive growth.
- The phrase human resources belies a certain bias toward viewing people as something that can be utilized, controlled, moved around, acquired, and dispensed with.
- When you are learning to be a professional, it is not just a matter of memorizing a set of rules or a stock of explicit knowledge. Often what you are learning is an outlook, a mood, a disposition. You are learning to absorb a whole way of being – picking up practices, rather than learning about practices. This learning is anything but clean, rote, or logically arranged. Learning to be a practicing musician, like learning to be a practicing executive, is a sloppy process. It is intuitive and vague.
- A jazz musician learns the norms of meta-learning, how to help others think and how and when to give advice.
- Creativity and innovation are inherently social accomplishments and involve linking with current and past activities, not separating from them.
- You say yes to the mess by surrendering control – by opening yourself up to the capriciousness of the crowd, with no guarantee of success for your efforts. Ultimately, that takes one quality above all others: Courage.
- Jazz shows us that followership can be not just satisfactory work but a noble calling. And it all begins with the ear.
- Group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result. Bill Evans
- Improvisation cannot succeed – whether the medium is jazz, comedy teams or new product development – unless the players are extraordinarily adept at both leadership and followership. Indeed, the simple practice of taking turns leading and supporting might be the single practice most responsible for relational breakthroughs.
- Recent research on collective intelligence shows that when people are listened to deeply, groups themselves become more articulate and brilliant.
- Three factors differentiated high-performing, smart groups
 - Social sensitivity: These groups were high in empathy, able to read one another's emotions. The capacity to tune into what others were thinking, feeling, and sensing helped the intellectual capacity of the entire group.
 - Inclusive involvement and turn taking: Groups in which leaders took more airtime, talked a great deal, and left less room for others performed poorly.
 - Groups with higher proportion of females outperformed groups made up of mostly males. Women are better socialized in sensitivity and making room for others.
- When jazz players comp, they create a space that welcomes and acknowledge another person's current state of mind while also providing provocation that might rouse him or her to consider new possibilities. Jazz players are expected to perform three seemingly mutually exclusive tasks –

confirm, challenge or provoke, and continue – but coping works best precisely by making that connection by doing all that at the same time.

- Keegan: holding environment performs three simultaneous functions: holding on, letting go, and staying in place. The environment holds well by mirroring back, meeting the person's needs through recognition and confirmation. It supports, recognizes who the person is in the moment by acknowledging how he thinks and feels, and by joining "the very way he understand and interprets the world.
- The environment needs to let go, challenging learners to extend beyond their current state and to reframe and rethink the way they are constructing the world.
- A holding environment stays in place, maintaining a presence while the learner goes through the process of reframing and making sense of the novel situation, supporting the person who is becoming more than what he or she was, and helping the person to retrospectively make sense of what just happened.
- Strengths and capabilities can become rigidities that block learning and adaptation.
- Bebop is hard-driving, fast music created by playing complicated patterns on top of intricate chords and syncopated phrases at an extremely fast tempo often sounding like a flurry of notes.
- Leaders know that they do not create great things alone. They concoct directions to get groups moving, and they do not expect that all of them will work out. If a better idea emerges as a result, then it is not a failure, but there is no way of knowing initially. It is a state of continuous, reflexive inquiry.
- Provocative competence involves introducing a small disruption to routine. What makes provocative competence an "art" is the introduction of just enough unusual material that it engages people to be mindful – to pay attention in new ways. The disruption must be scaled appropriately. To that end, timing is critical. Leaders who disrupt on a regular basis or try to be provocative all the time are obnoxious, and are eventually ignored and probably mimicked.
- It is key to create situations that demand activity. Passivity is not an option.
- Facilitate incremental reorientation by encouraging repetition. The repetition constitutes, in effect, a comfortable one, but not one that is too comfortable. Even while people are leaning on old habits, they have to attend to new cues and new options, and start to manage and process information within a new, broader context.
- Leaders cannot stop to judge too soon. They need to encourage people to keep trying, to explore gestures and utterances for a potential appeal that might not become clear until much later.
- Analogic sharpening of perspectives and thought processes allow people to look back at what is emerging and jump into the morass as they make comparisons, links, and connections to a larger, emerging whole. They link the familiar with new utterances, adjusting to the unanticipated in a way that reframes previous material. People start to notice affinity between pieces that previously seemed disconnected; resemblances that no one noticed before start to emerge.
- Wisdom begins in wonder. (Edith Hamilton paraphrase of) Socrates
- Organizations need routines and structures. The problem comes when companies over rely on structured responses, especially in situations where each different kind of thinking is needed.
- Eleven practices and structures to emulate:
- Approach leadership tasks as experiments
 - How can you encourage people to see leadership as a set of learning experiments?
 - How can you make it safe for people to take thoughtful risks?
 - Can you think of a time you surprised yourself by leaping in and trying something new, even though there was no guarantee of the outcome? Have you shared such stories with others?

- When have you encouraged people to explore novel responses?
- Where else in your organization can you encourage people to leap in and experiment, to adjust on the spot rather than waiting for a plan or sticking with safe routines?
- Boost information processing in the midst of action.
 - How can you create spaces for people to tell stories about what they are doing in their work, a chance to share learning experiences and insights?
 - How can you create opportunities for people to entertain various scenarios and future possibilities?
- Prepare for serendipity by deliberately breaking a routine
 - Where have you seen a routine or habit that has outlived its usefulness and has blocked the flow of good ideas or good execution?
 - What routines do you notice that need to be deliberately disrupted so as to open the possibility of new thinking and the search for innovative solutions?
 - What can you do to help others unlearn their tacitly held beliefs and practices so that they and you can move beyond the limitations of accepted ways of doing things?
- Expand the vocabulary of yes to overcome the glamour of no
 - Instead of asking “Why did I get stuck with this set of tools and these people?” assume that you can make the situation work, somehow.
 - Too often, in established cultures, cynicism is a way to attain status. It is much easier to critique than to build. The word “no” has seductive glamour and richly nuanced grammar and vocabulary.
 - Too often, executives become far more adept at critiquing others ideas than they are at creating their own original ideas or lending support to those of others.
 - How can you expand the vocabulary of “yes” in your organization? How can you deliberately highlight the positive potential in nascent ideas that have yet to achieve fruition?
 - Where have you or others seen an obstacle and turned it into an opportunity?
 - When have you engaged in appreciative inquiry?
 - How can you inquire into positive deviance or epiphanies that have led to innovative action?
 - How can you help your organization create a vocabulary of “yes,” a stronger repertoire of positivity? For example, how can you look for opportunities to ask how your group or organization is functioning when people are at their best? Can you encourage people to talk about moments of exceptional meaning, full engagement in their work, or experiences of high purpose and self-worth?
- Take advantage of the clunkers
 - When has “getting it right no matter what” gotten in the way of learning from failure?
 - How can you further the belief that both success and failure generate useful data that stimulates learning?
 - When have you learned from a failure yet failed to let others know about it?
 - What can you do to lower status differences so that it becomes safe for others to admit and learn from their mistakes?
 - Since the consequences of action are by nature often unpredictable, what can you do to create an aesthetic of forgiveness in your organization?
 - How are you making it safe for interpersonal risk-taking?
 - When is the last time you praised someone who dissented from you, demonstrating to others that alternative perspectives are valuable?

- Ensure that everyone has a chance to solo from time to time
 - When self-directed work teams are performing well, they are often characterized by distributed, multiple leadership in which people take turns heading up various projects as their expertise is needed.
 - No one is allowed to interrupt or redirect; instead, people are encouraged to build on other ideas they have heard. A variation of this approach is to require that no one speaks twice until every other person in the group speaks at least once. This is an impersonal, non-negotiable structure that monitors airtime, cultivates group creativity, and ensures that every individual has a voice.
 - What can you do to make room for multiple voices and perspectives within your system? How can you assure that it is safe to articulate diverse views and that they are taken seriously by others?
 - When have you last seen people support one another, help each other to think out loud, to experiment, to take a risk with an unproven idea?
- Celebrate comping to create a culture of noble followership.
 - What can you do in your organization to acknowledge efforts to help each other be successful? When have you last seen people support one another and help each other think out loud, experiment, or take a risk with an unproven idea?
 - How can you reward people for helping others be successful rather than simply rewarding their individual achievements?
 - When have you last actively acknowledged that you rely on others' input to improve or complete your thinking?
- Create minimal structures that maximize autonomy.
 - Balance is key. If leaders try to create too much structure by demanding that the group report progress at arbitrary times, they are likely to meet resistance or reap mere compliance rather than a genuine moment of reframing and learning. This might suggest that managers create a minimal structure that calls for a reflective time-out at the halfway point of a group project.
 - What pivots and markers do you have in place to update and inspire each other about ongoing contributions, insights, experiments and findings?
 - What are the core minimal values and vision that are non-negotiable to which all must adhere so that all are free to embellish, branch out, respond, and innovate?
 - Encourage serious play. Too much control inhibits flow.
 - How can you create space and cultivate serious play in your organization?
 - What can you do to lessen anxiety to support ongoing learning and collaboration in your organization?
- Jam
 - Good ideas can come from several different sources, including those outside the accepted boundaries of an organization. The conventional model we have grown up with proposes that manufacturers identify the needs of users, develop products, and gain profit by protecting and selling the goods they have developed. But if we include users and customers in our jam sessions, the field of ideas expands almost exponentially. Users, after all, have good ideas. They commonly know how to solve their needs and are often intrinsically willing to share their insights and innovations.
 - Should you be sponsoring open forums for people to discuss ideas freely and analyze nascent ideas and discuss results from experimenting?

- What else could you do to foster informal, in-house learning from others' activities? Cultivate provocative competence: create expansive promises as occasions for stretching out into unfamiliar territory.
- One common learning obstacle in organizations occurs when managers choose to address only those problems that are familiar and those issues for which a solution is imaginable.
- When have you last noticed the edge of peoples' comfort level and encouraged them to go beyond the familiar?
- How are people in our organization "playing it safe" by repeating what has worked in the past?
- When have you last noticed anyone stretching competence by edging around his or her own comfort level?
- Have you deliberately paid attention to who people are when they are operating at their best, even though they might have forgotten it themselves?
- Have you been able to remember who they are at their best even though they might not always be performing at that level?
- Can you imagine an incremental disruption that might dislodge peoples' habits and demand that they respond in new ways?