

## **An innovative tempo**

*A business meeting should be like a jazz performance - building on the ideas of others, WALLACE IMMEN discovers*

WALLACE IMMEN -  
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Brian Hayman learned some important lessons about corporate teamwork when he played jazz piano in his formative years in some of the seedier clubs in Montreal.

He recalls one night when a pianist in a combo continued to play while other players were trying to do their solos. "The band finally dragged him into the parking lot and beat the stuffing out of him, to give him a refresher course in listening," Mr. Hayman says.

That's not a recommended way to deal with someone who tries to rustle the agenda in a business meeting, advises Mr. Hayman, who is now using jazz performances to teach how business teams can learn to innovate.

In a seminar he calls *Getting in the Groove*, Mr. Hayman invites audiences to observe a jazz combo at work as an example of how to move confidently in uncharted directions by relying on an ethical compass and a set of accepted rules that lead to successful improvisation.

He believes Enron Corp. and some of the creatively mismanaged dot-bombs of the 1990s might still be in business if their key players had tuned in to the riffs of Dizzy Gillespie or John Coltrane.

At first glance, the jazz performance that leads off the seminar is hardly the kind of behaviour you'd expect from a dynamic organization. A keyboard player and guitarist are trading ideas, but they're not even looking at each other. The drummer seems focused on the ceiling and the bass player's eyes are so tightly closed, he could be sleeping.

But it's soon clear the members of the quartet are depending on subtle clues to help move what becomes a form of discussion forward with each player offering arguments that other players can build on or refute.

It seems as though this team of musicians has practised these songs many times, but in fact they met just before the performance and agreed what tunes they were going to play and what key they were going to use, Mr. Hayman explained. Everything else evolves, often in ways no one could predict.

The players don't have to look at each other for cues. "What it comes down to is listening," he says. "That's how you learn and how you make good music together."

Successful businesses have sometimes been compared to well-conducted symphony orchestras, but Mr. Hayman thinks jazz is a much better metaphor for creative organizations.

He once worked for a steel company. "There, discussions tended to run along the lines of how do we

make nails today. I don't know; why don't we make them the same way we did yesterday."

That symphonic approach, where the parts are all written and everyone is expected to play the same theme in the same way at the same time, may work well on the factory floor or in a mortgage loan office, but it is death to creativity, he says.

In jazz, people are expected to constantly innovate, and new players can join the group and immediately fit in as long as they understand the underlying rules.

"Peter Drucker, with whom I seldom argue, has it dead wrong, however, when he suggests that 21st century organizational leaders will have to learn to behave like the maestros of symphony orchestras," Mr. Hayman writes in *Getting in the Groove: Jazz and the Innovating Enterprise*. "In these 'organizations' everyone's part is written -- Beethoven, Mozart, Stravinsky have seen to that! 21st century organizations will be operating in environments of such uncertainty and complexity that leaders will have to settle for establishing 'rules-of-play' and making certain that they hire good improvisers."

After each set, the audience is asked by moderator John Burton, a lawyer and theologian who teaches ethics at York University's Schulich School of Business, to break into groups to discuss their impressions.

At first, the comments are single words, like trust, confidence, dependence, but soon the discussion is about how business meetings are a process of negotiation and creating as you go.

"I think jazz can teach more than the social sciences about how life works in the real world. The great thing is it is not theoretical, you get results immediately," Mr. Hayman says.

One of the important insights turns out to be about when to break in and when to keep quiet. In jazz, solos are not supposed to last forever and players learn the importance of knowing when a chorus is winding down, which is the opportunity for someone else to break in. Then it's important to move in fast to launch a new solo.

Mr. Hayman likes to tell the perhaps apocryphal tale about jazz saxophonist John Coltrane during one of his famous sessions with trumpeter Miles Davis. Mr. Coltrane was notorious for putting out endless torrents of notes that left no room for anyone else to break in. Mr. Coltrane is supposed to have shrugged when other players complained and said he didn't know how to stop. Mr. Davis fired back: "It's easy. Just take the horn out of your mouth."

Other insights from the performance is that while it is all-important to understand your own instrument and to play it well, it is just as important to respect the capabilities of the other group members. In all too many organizations what happens is that you get a lot of individuals working individually who don't consider the competence people from other departments can offer, Mr. Burton suggests.

Of course, any organization can also waste a lot of time if the members don't come prepared. In Duke Ellington's words: "Anyone who plays anything worth hearing knows what he's going to play, no matter whether he prepares a day ahead or a beat ahead."

The ultimately satisfying jazz performance or good business meeting will have an outcome that no one could have predicted at the beginning, Mr. Hayman says. "Your expectations change when playing off someone else's idea and you should always come out with something you didn't expect."

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## **All that jazz**

Lessons a jazz performance can teach about business meetings:

Start with an agreement on the agenda. Jazz musicians "limit" themselves by agreeing on some fundamentals -- what key to play in; what chord progression to follow; what tempo to use.

Bring a high level of emotional and intellectual energy.

Keep an open mind, a desire to learn and get better at what you do.

Allow everyone to participate. The essence of jazz is collective improvisation -- the spontaneous, dynamic and creative interplay of the performing artists.

Be flexible. In jazz, as in a good business collaboration, what is created among the performers will be greater than any individual could have created on his or her own.

Be a good listener. The rule in jazz is: "No listening; no connecting. No connecting; no synergy. No synergy; no creativity. No creativity; no jazz."

Be versatile and willing to respond to what is going on around you. While jazz features instrumental solos, at their best, solos are not monologues but creations open to the influences of the accompanying musicians.

Be willing to take risks. You can't have improvisation without the freedom to express yourself. But there can be no freedom without structure. Playing anything that comes into one's head results in chaos. Limits serve as enablers of, rather than constraints upon improvisation. Structure liberates by providing a framework for self-organization.

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