



JAZZ INSPIRED
JAZZ AND CHANGE CONSULTING

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Abstract

There is more emphasis than ever on the need for change. In this essay on organizational change, a senior practitioner reflects on some parallels between the art of jazz and the art of management consulting.

“The real power of Jazz...is that a group of people can come together and create...improvised art and negotiate their agendas...and that negotiation is the art.” Wynton Marsalis from *Jazz*, a film by Ken Burns



What is the connection between change, consulting and jazz?

Even as a child I was attracted to jazz music. I recently noticed that this great American art form was influencing how I viewed my clients and my role as an organizational change consultant.

Jazz is an art form as social process.

Jazz is a social process that results in the constant creation of new ideas and innovative musical interaction between musicians and their audience. The audience is both consumer and co-creator.

Organizations are social inventions and change is a social process. Peter Drucker said that organizations exist to serve a priority need of society. Organizational change, if properly done, involves its audience – management, employees, customers, other stakeholders.

Studies of successful and unsuccessful change initiatives consistently show the critical importance of people and organizational issues. The failure of change programs is almost universally the failure to appreciate that organizational change is a social process.

Technology change is also a social process. Examples in the consumer world are plentiful: Microsoft's Vista operating system boondoggle, Google's search success and the ubiquity of Apple iPods and iPhones.

In the workplace however, the human side of technology driven change is almost always given short shift. On such programs, I often explain my role as an advocate for the 'end user community'. When technology driven change programs go off-track, it is typically when they have lost touch with their constituents – their audience.

The core of jazz is improvisation.

It's what sets jazz music apart. A jazz musician was asked: "Don't you get bored playing the same standards all the time over and over again?" He replied, "Every time we play, it is different... we seldom know what's going to happen next."

Improvisation in consulting is what keeps it fresh for me. Yes there are patterns but no two client organizations, situations and sets of people are the same. I'm excited, on a continuous basis, by 'playing' with clients, identifying their needs and inventing the right approach, the right intervention, for them, at that moment in time.



Respect for tradition is integral to jazz innovation.

In its birth jazz drew on many roots and continues to in its evolution. Jazz musicians, even those that consistently push and expand the music's boundaries, retain a deep reverence for what and who has come before them. Jazz is a conscious, purposeful search for new opportunities – the ability to engage the unexpected, incongruities and problems as opportunities for new discovery.

As an organizational change agent, I must respect the client's culture and remember too Drucker's axiom: Never try to change a company culture; work with what you've got. I often look to an organization's origins and its founders to inspire a new way forward.

Assisting clients to rediscover their original mandate, mission and values is often an effective way to link the heritage they hold in esteem and the new direction they must take. Like jazz, a source of business innovation is frequently creating the new by reinventing the old – in a new context, and in so doing, providing a bridge from old to new.

Jazz is about collaboration, inclusiveness and team work.

The elements that create a successful jazz group are the same that sustain a successful business team. Good jazz and a well performing business depend on creativity, agility, empathy and flexibility. Whether world-class jazz or business, both require teamwork, multitasking, cross-functional awareness, innovation and responsiveness to change. As one jazz musician put it: "That's how the creativity stays alive ... we all bring what we do best to the table."

A jazz ensemble is an autonomous, self-governing, self-regulating high performing team – adaptable and independent, in support of individual excellence and expression (e.g., the solo) and the interdependent structure and purpose of the whole. In jazz there is a constant transition between leading and supporting – as strengths and capabilities of both the individual and the team are expanded.

A project team – the organizational platform on which I am usually doing my consulting, can be characterized similarly. Leadership is no longer a static position but fluctuates depending on the ability to respond to changing needs and expertise. Leading successful project teams transcends traditional job descriptions. It depends instead on the organizational ability to balance the need for structure with the need for flexibility – to consistently blend individual intention and behavior with group intention and behavior. This dynamic is at the core of a well-performing team – business or jazz.

