

# Creativity as Collaborative Accomplishment: Exploring Jazz Improvisation

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# Jazz Band as Prototype for High Involvement Strategy

- How can we create conditions that support collaborative creativity?
- How can we maximize learning through doing?

# Creativity as Joint Performance

- Myth of the lone genius: the romantic view
- Knowing and discovering as relational achievements: questioning, probing, listening, wondering
- Social systems and organizations as “collective minds”
- Leadership: creating environments that actively foster creativity

# Improvising

- Think of a time when you found yourself in a radically unfamiliar situation and had to take action that lead to a successful outcome. This is probably a situation for which you were unprepared, when you were faced with some unforeseen obstacle or unexpected surprise. It may well have been an incident that momentarily made you feel joyful, exhilarated; perhaps incompetent, nervous, or even frightened. Nevertheless you responded, took action, and something good came of it.

1. Describe the incident.
2. How did you respond? What actions did you take? What did it feel like?
3. What contributed to the successful outcome? What was it about you that made it a successful experience? What role did others play?
4. What regularities / familiarities allowed you to make some sense of the situation (background, routines, peoples' roles, etc)?
5. What elements were new or unfamiliar?
6. As a result of this experience, how did the situation impact your sense of yourself?  
What did you learn about yourself from this?

# Learning, “Intelligence,” Creativity, and Identity

- John Dewey’s definition of learning: the capacity to imagine new possibilities, the capacity to generate novel responses to familiar stimuli
- Discovering who we are by discovering how we behave in unfamiliar situations

# New image of organizations and leadership

- Organizations as collective networks and sets of relationships
- Leadership = facilitating and supporting healthy, productive relationships.
  - “What matters now isn’t individual empowerment, it’s collaborative advantage.”  
-Warren Bennis
- Global interdependence and diversity
- Emphasize mutuality and inclusiveness.

# Leadership: Unleashing Innovation Within Chaotic Environments

- Leadership as posing provocative questions
- Leadership = facilitating and supporting healthy, productive relationships
  - “What matters now isn’t individual empowerment, it’s collaborative advantage.”
    - Warren Bennis

# Improvisation: Living on the Appreciative Edge

- Self organizing system
- Dynamic tension between chaos and order
- Strategy and implementation are simultaneous
- Devoted to continual re-inquiry
- Openness to novelty: ongoing quest to discover best alternatives
- Small, positive actions have large consequences
- Agile and adaptable organization

# Improvisation and Affirmation

- When human systems are improvising, they are living at the Appreciative edge.
- Innovation, experimentation, and improvisation are, at core, acts of affirmation.

# Who can improvise?

- Language as a prototype

# 7 Guiding Principles of Jazz Improvisation

1. Art of unlearning habits: overcoming trap of success
2. Appreciative mindset: saying “yes” to the mess
3. Minimal consensus and minimal structures that allow maximum autonomy
4. Embracing errors as a source of learning and discovery
5. Provocative competence: incremental disruptions
6. Alternating between soloing and supporting
7. Striking a groove: dynamic synchronization

# 1. Master the Art of “Unlearning”

- Create opportunities to surprise yourself
- Develop routines and abandon them
- Be suspicious of patterns
- “If it sounds clean and slick, I’ve been doing it too long.”
- Throw yourself into the terror

*“I’m attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a certain quality, which can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get from writing. It is something to do with the “edge.” Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown.”*

–Saxophonist Steve Lacy

## 2. Appreciative Mindset and Engagement: Saying “Yes” to the Mess

- Whatever has happened or is happening has positive potential for innovation
- Attend closely to what is happening and jump in
- Every act, every utterance, has affirmative potential. Any material can be embellished in a positive direction.

# Appreciative Mindset: A New Frame for Leaders

- “The most important job of a leader is to maximize peoples’ strengths so that their weaknesses become irrelevant.”  
– Peter Drucker

# Appreciative Mindset: Amplify Positive Deviance

- We have the materials right here and right now.

# 3. Minimal Consensus and Maximum Autonomy

- Limited structures and tacit rules that coordinate action through time.
- Impersonal, minimal constraints that invite embellishment and transformation.
- These rules themselves can become the targets of transformation (even while they provide orientation).

# Minimal structure: Guided Autonomy

- Give people lots of freedom to experiment and respond to hunches.
- Assume when people disagree that they're both right.
- Tolerate and encourage dissent and debate.

## 4. Embrace Errors as a Source of Learning and Discovery

- Risky, explorative actions are expected to produce the unexpected, including errors.
- Errors are incorporated as part of the ongoing action.
- Potential to be integrated into new pattern of activity.
- Repeat it, amplify it, develop it further.

# Errors as Source of Learning

- *“When we have a failure, we...learn from it. We take this error and see what new information it can generate. It helps us see in new ways.”*
  - Safety manager at Boeing

# Psychological safety and learning cultures

- Nursing units with BETTER leadership and coworker relationships reported MORE errors (25 vs 1000 patient days).
- WHY?

- Mistakes were not held against them, were so important that they had to TALK about them and LEARN from them.

# Mistakes as a source of learning

- “Enlightened trial and error outperforms the planning of flawless execution.”
  - Bob Sutton, The Knowing-Doing Gap

# Cultural Inertia

- Where do you see cultural inertia in your organization? People loyal to well-learned habits that might not be appropriate? Relying on routines that once made sense and / or were successful? Holding on to routines and behaviors that are not serving the whole system?

# 5. Provocative Competence

- Explore and monitor the perimeter of comfort and the edge of the unknown.
- Create incremental disruptions that dislodge habit and demand openness to what unfolds.
- Nurture an affirmative image of what's possible.
- Create situations that demand action: passivity is not an option.
- Open and support alternative pathways.

# Provocative Competence: “Tweaking” Cultural Inertia

- British Air
- Navy rescue drill
- Sony
- Ford Mustang vs. Mazda

# Provocative Competence

- As part of that organizational cultural inertia you identified earlier, what's one small thing you could do to disrupt an ingrained habit that's been an obstacle to learning and innovation?

## 6. Alternate Between Soloing and Comping

- Take turns: make the other happen
- “Comping” = Accompanying
- Provide a “holding environment” that supports the unfolding of others’ ideas and actions
- Give one another room to experiment, to develop themes
- Attentive listening enables exceptional performance

# 7. Striking a Groove: Dynamic Synchronization

- Appreciative attunement to others
- Continual attempts to shape one's creations to what one has heard and is hearing
- Negotiating a shared sense of the beat
- Expressions of connection and ecstasy: sailing, gliding, grooving
- Expressions of receptivity, openness, fluid connection
- Renewed sense of hope

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