

What jazz can teach us about innovation

How an understanding of jazz can improve learning and innovation in our organizations

- 1. Individual competence** | To be a valued member of the group, each member must be an accomplished musician with musicianship skills, a deep understanding of music theory (scales, chords, progressions), and a comprehensive knowledge of compositions that have become jazz standards.
 - Team members should continuously develop their technical expertise (skills, knowledge, and judgment)
 - Team members should develop their competence as reflective practitioners
- 2. Continuous reflection** | Jazz musicians must be able to improvise and that requires the ability to think carefully about what they are playing as it is being played during a performance. They also discuss after performances and try out different ways of playing during rehearsals.
 - Encourage personal and collective reflection during action
 - Use regular After Action Reviews
- 3. Challenge habits and conventional practices** | Some musicians repeat familiar routines rather than risk failure. They can be technically brilliant but lacking in imagination and soul. The truly great jazz musicians continually push their own boundaries, move out of their "comfort zones", and question their previous ideas about the songs they play. As the great pianist Keith Jarrett once said, "The music is a struggle. You have to want to struggle."
 - Consciously question routine ways of doing things – engage in double loop learning
 - Use "devil's advocates" in meetings and discussions to challenge assumptions
 - Use metaphors to expand ways of thinking

4. **Everyone solos** | In a balanced jazz group everyone solos. This is seen as both a right and a responsibility – all the musicians are expected to solo but they also want to have the opportunity to show what they can play.

5. **Good accompaniment is necessary for good solos** | In a jazz group, everyone is expected to accompany the soloist in a way that creates space for the soloist's ideas and encourages their creativity.

6. **Dialogue and exchange** | Jazz musicians continuously "play off" one another, exchanging phrases and chords, interpreting, and building on each others' ideas, and exploring new musical patterns and sometimes deliberately trying to defy each others' expectations!

7. **Embrace errors as sources of creativity and learning** | Jazz groups thrive on improvisation and that means musicians must take risks with playing – going outside of their comfort zone. Sometimes the risks don't immediately pay off but everyone learns from that because of the continual musical dialogue between the musicians as they play together.

- Create opportunities for all team members to lead discussions
- Encourage all team members to represent the team in outside events.

- Encourage mentoring, buddying, and coaching
- Give recognition when colleagues support each other to take "center stage"

- Create "spaces" for dialogue
- Use a team approach to problem solving
- Create diversity in teams to bring in fresh perspectives

- Develop a supportive learning environment in which reporting and discussing errors is not seen as "risky" behavior
- Examine errors in terms of learning opportunities
- Use action learning to explore errors in a safe environment

8. **Balance structure with improvisation**

| Jazz music is created by improvising around songs. The songs provide the guiding structure for the music but do not constrain the musicians. In fact, the songs provide a sense of order – a continuous sense of cohesion and coordination (but not the individual notes and rhythm) from which the improvised music flows.

- Whenever possible, work to shared visions rather than standard operating procedures
- Use “stories” rather than rules to capture the essence of good practice

9. **Meet and play with others regularly**

| Musicians frequently take part in jam sessions – informal opportunities to “hang out” together, share ideas, ask questions of experienced players, learn new techniques, and hear stories.

- Actively participate in “communities of practice”
- Take part in networks
- Join professional associations
- Seek out mentoring opportunities with more experienced colleagues
- Mentor less experienced colleagues

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