

I've spent my entire adult life learning about business and how best to navigate the business world in order to be successful, individually and ultimately as a leader. While there are many traditional ways to understand human dynamics in the workplace, it has been the lessons I've extracted from my love of music and specifically playing jazz that have guided me the most. Over the years I've come to realize that jazz, which is so distinctive because of its emphasis on improvisation, is a powerful metaphor for operating in any group or organization, profit or non-profit. These lessons I've extracted from jazz have had a profound effect on my business career, my involvement in various organizations and my pursuit of living a creative life. I share just a few of these perspectives on useful principles that can be widely applied regardless of whether you have any training in music.

LESSON 1: CREATE A FOUNDATION

Jazz is the only truly original form of music which our country has given the world. It began at the beginning of the 20th century and has been evolving ever since. Simply stated it emanated from the merging of African rhythms, songs and harmonies with European instruments and harmonies. It is recognized throughout the world as a distinctly unique form of music rooted in American culture which continues to evolve. The story of jazz and its diversity of styles richly reflect so much of American history since 1900 – societal tensions, suffering and the stories of so many who were seeking to find their way in the new world.

Jazz is differentiated by its emphasis on improvisation. To improvise is to perform music extemporaneously. Jazz flourishes in part because of jazz musicians' passion to be creative and express themselves with their ideas and feelings. When I use the term jazz you need to understand that for me it's a very broad descriptor because so many music styles have been derived from jazz including the blues, Dixieland, swing, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and even rap. When I think about jazz and what can be learned from it, it's most useful to begin with the blues.

The most interesting thing about the blues is that a blues song is usually 12 measures long regardless of whether it's played by BB King or James Taylor. And it is based upon the same chordal progression. A standard blues tune typically employs three different chords which are based on the first, fourth and fifth notes of a scale (for musicians, that would be the tonic, subdominant and dominant of whatever key you're playing in). If we were playing in the key of C the traditional structure would be 4 bars of C, 2 bars of F, 2 bars of C, 1 bar of G, 1 bar of F, and 2 bars of C.

As disparate as blues tunes are, almost all blues music starts with this 12 measure long structure and the same I/IV/V chordal progression. It's striking to realize that this foundation underlies all the rich improvisation and creativity which characterizes the blues. In addition, there is a series of agreements to which each musician strictly adheres. The musicians playing the blues not only agree on the length of the tune (12 bars) and the chordal progression (I/IV/V), but the key that they're playing in, the time signature (typically 4 beats to a bar), the tempo set by the leader and the typical convention of playing the melody followed by improvisation and ending with a restatement of the melody. This foundation or series of shared agreements among musicians provides a platform which, if the musicians adhere to it, actually frees up the musicians to be creative and to improvise at will. The foundation is not a constraint, rather it facilitates the musicians' creativity.

I have found in my experience that truly successful groups of people and organizations are distinguished by having a foundation of shared agreements. They share a set of beliefs and behaviors which align them as an organization and guide their direction. If defined correctly, this foundation can serve many purposes but it is particularly essential in encouraging creativity and innovation.

THIS IS WHAT A FOUNDATION MIGHT LOOK LIKE IN AN ORGANIZATION:

It begins with an articulation of a vision and mission. Both are essential . . . a vision is an aspirational statement of what the organization is seeking to achieve in the future . . . the vision may not be immediately attainable but it serves as an inspiration for everyone. It is meant to move people's souls and create an emotional connection with the organization. On the other hand, a mission is a clear and concise statement of what the organization does. It's meant to be a constant reminder of what the organization is supposed to do. These two components together shape the organization's direction, and should be strong enough to endure over a period of years. More importantly, it's useful to make frequent reference to these statements to ensure that the organization and its people are aligned and moving in the same direction.

At NAVTEQ, a group of leaders and I spent considerable time thinking about and then finalizing the vision and mission for the organization. We did this at a time when the company was expanding beyond its initial roots. We felt it was important to do this work before we added thousands of employees and new support functions so that we connected old and new employees with a clear and consistent direction for the company at a time when digital maps as we know them today were only present in the luxury automotive market. We also realized that if we set the right vision and mission, employees would see how their efforts would contribute to the success of the company.

NAVTEQ's vision stood the test of time as digital mapping eventually extended to the internet, cell phones and a myriad of other devices and applications. Here is the vision we created together:

By revolutionizing the way people think about and interact with maps, we foresee a world in which everyone finds their way to people, places and opportunities more easily and safely than ever before.

AND THE MISSION:

We produce the most accurate, enhanced digital map for a changing world.

Time and time again we shared this vision and mission with employees, and our existing and potential customers. We found that it was a very effective way to give our customers confidence that we were focused on the right things and that we could deliver a digital map unparalleled at that point in time, and evolve our future mapping capabilities to meet market demands. Whether you've taken a Garmin device on a walking tour of a historic neighborhood, downloaded a Bing map with directions off the internet, or located your favorite coffee shop on your mobile phone while visiting a new city, you've experienced the continued output of this original NAVTEQ vision and mission.

Other key elements of a foundation include agreements on the values and behaviors which are essential to the organization's success; these are often collectively referred to as the "culture" of an organization. I

have found that if there isn't broad agreement on the values and behaviors that should be embraced and demonstrated by all employees, then there could be unnecessary tension and dysfunction. Much more time and effort is then required to get employees focused appropriately on the business at hand. And, to be effective, the culture has to be integrated into the relevant processes that are key to the organization. Other elements of a foundation might include an articulation of the goals and strategies and initiatives which the organization has embraced. This makes it clear to every employee how the organization will achieve its vision and mission and set the right expectation as to what is important going forward.

In my own leadership experience, I've learned that taking the time to create and build a solid foundation, which I refer to as an Operating Framework, has paid huge dividends in aligning all of the employees. People become excited and energized by having this structure because there is clarity about what the organization is doing and because employees can readily see how they can contribute and add value through their individual creativity and innovation. In this environment, they feel free and empowered to innovate and create.

A jazz ensemble is most successful when musicians begin with a set of shared agreements or a foundation that allows them to improvise at will and to express their creative ideas. An organization is no different. So, create a foundation!

LESSON 2: SURROUND YOURSELF WITH TALENT

The most notable and creative jazz musicians have experienced great success because they surrounded themselves with great talent. The legendary Miles Davis, highly regarded as one of the most innovative and influential contributors to the evolution of jazz, was known for his desire to find and play with musicians who were innovative in their own right and who in turn would influence his music and style. When he was a young musician, he boldly sought out his idol, famed saxophonist Charlie Parker and subsequently played in many jam sessions in Harlem with him. Miles was frequently a sideman in these sessions which included future leaders of a variety of genres including Thelonious Monk and bebop.

During his entire career, Miles would continue this pattern of seeking out talented and diverse musicians to play with, both new and established. In doing so, he knew he would be constantly listening, learning and absorbing their sounds which in turn dramatically influenced his own creativity. In time, Miles was composing and leading his own ensembles but this did not stop him from constantly looking for new musicians with unique talents and viewpoints so that he could continue to create and evolve through many music styles. He particularly had an impact on improvisation through his belief in and focus on individual expression.

As a developing jazz musician and composer, I realized how valuable it was for me to play with musicians who were more talented. I found quickly that my performance was enhanced as their playing and contributions stretched me beyond what I thought were my limitations. And clearly listening to each of them gave me new ideas to be explored and expanded upon in my improvisation.

Inherent in jazz ensembles is the fact that the musicians are each bringing different technical skill sets to the bandstand. It's unlikely that any given musician will play instruments other than the one or two that has become their specialty. From the outset, therefore, the individual talents of the group are comple-

mentary to each other, not duplicative. This concept of complementary skill sets is important in an organization as well as a jazz ensemble.

In jazz, the talent of a jazz musician is immediately transparent. When jazz musicians play with a new player, it does not take long to quickly assess that player's skills and talent. Even with them warming up on their instrument, you can determine their intonation, their facility for playing time within a structure, and glimpses of their improvisational ability. And, in performance the contribution of each individual player is exposed and the talent is very clear to everyone. The expectation of each musician is to play well as part of the ensemble but have the capacity to express oneself individually. While familiarity with the music itself serves as a primary measure of the level of competence, it does not take long to determine if a band member can keep up with the expectations of the group.

As I reflect on the subject of talent, there's much to learn from jazz. As an individual, seeking out the wisdom of others, including working for extremely talented and often demanding leaders, is essential in order to grow. This is true for any individual regardless of their organizational level. The life of a jazz musician is one of continuous learning and unending experimentation. There should be no difference in the life of a non-musician.

Admittedly, it's harder to assess talent in an organization than in jazz and it takes longer. A leader's job is never done in assessing talent and shaping teams to be optimal. This aspect of talent management is often overlooked but not impossible to do. It begins with recognizing that it's important to do repeatedly.

As a leader, the task of building teams of talented people is essential. I like to say that diversity is the essence of creativity; diversity in people, thoughts, and approach are all important, in jazz and in organizations. Assembling effective teams must encompass talent, complementary skill sets and diversity.

At the end of the day, individuals who are most successful in their given fields have learned to surround themselves with the best possible talent, knowing that their own talents will be challenged, nurtured and strengthened by being part of a truly talented team. So, surround yourself with talent!

LESSON 3: EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

At the heart of jazz is the opportunity to create and innovate, and we know that as improvisation. I think there would be general agreement that jazz improvisation can be very intimidating and the thought of playing jazz overwhelming. People often try to explain it by saying certain jazz musicians are particularly gifted and blessed with innate talent. I have found that this is the same way business people think about creativity or innovation in an organization. They often think that being creative is limited to just a few "creative" people who work in marketing, or research and development, or some other such designated group. But I don't buy it! I believe that anyone can be creative if they don't become overwhelmed or intimidated by the thought of being creative. In fact, organizations need everyone to turn on their creative abilities if the company is to be truly successful. The key for me has been to reduce the complexity and the mystery of creativity to its simplicity.

There is a simple idea or concept or structure at the root of anything complex. And jazz improvisation is no exception. I think the light bulb went off for me when I was very young, although at the time I did not

realize it. Long before David Letterman and Jay Leno, there was the Jack Parr Show. At the beginning of each show, the conductor Jose Melis would engage with the audience with a game he called the telephone game. He would call on someone and ask for their home phone number. Jose would then play the numbers on the keyboard and turn the resulting melody into a song. It was a simple yet very interesting demonstration that music is a series of notes often times with an underlying pattern or logic.

When I was studying music at DePauw and playing in big bands all over the country, I decided that I needed to improve my ability to improvise. I was fortunate enough to have some lessons with David Baker, the renowned jazz professor at Indiana University. I remember that he began by listening to me play on the piano. Then he asked what was I trying to accomplish. I told him that I thought that my piano fundamentals were solid but that I wanted to be able to improvise more freely. He responded by saying I could play anything in jazz if I could first thoroughly learn and play John Coltrane's famous tenor sax solo on the tune Giant Steps. Most musicians would agree that this remains today one of the most admired jazz solos of all time which is complex and intimidating. David asked that I return when I felt I was prepared to play Coltrane's exact solo, note for note. He said if I were successful in this task, there would be nothing that would be an obstacle in my exceling at jazz improvisation.

When I returned, I played and David then asked me to analyze the solo. When I did so, it revealed a series of simple patterns which could be expressed as a series of numbers. It turns out Coltrane would frequently repeat the first, second, third and fifth notes of the underlying chord several different times in his solo. He then played other specific patterns repeatedly. By David instructing me to carefully study the notes and patterns of notes that Coltrane "improvised", I was able to clearly see the logic and simplicity of what he created.

Because Coltrane put the patterns together so artfully, most people's first reaction is that it was a stream of genius which although pleasing to the listener was enormously complex. And yet when it is broken down to its simplest elements, a series of patterns, the complex becomes very understandable and embraceable as a musician.

The lesson here is to never be overwhelmed or intimidated by complexity or that which you don't initially understand. This is true for individuals facing problems or challenges of any kind, and it's particularly true for organizations which frequently face challenging problems that often have no apparent solution. These problems often start to be accepted as not solvable within the organization which leads to dysfunction and frustration.

One of the new approaches we took as part of our Performance Excellence framework at Disney was something we called "Action Learning Initiatives" or ALI's. We decided to include an ALI as a component of our Leader's Pathway program. Our goal was to have each program's participants, comprised of leaders representing a wide variety of disciplines, tackle a long-standing theme park or resort problem as part of their program work together. The beauty of the ALIs was that these were not management case studies from some consultant but instead were very real complex issues that the business had been struggling with for years. So an ALI group would take the problem and with fresh eyes begin breaking down the problem to its most understandable components, ignoring the status quo. They analyzed and sought to understand whatever was initially not understood which led to their collective creativity kicking in. They

also were held accountable to certain values and behaviors in how they would function as a team which facilitated the work. Time and time again these groups presented insightful creative solutions which had long escaped the imagination of the rest of us. So, embrace complexity!

LESSON 4: PRACTICE CREATIVITY

Jazz forces musicians to be creative, sometimes at a very quick pace. Every time a jazz musician picks up his instrument, he is called upon to be creative – there is no alternative! It's clearly one of the distinguishing characteristics associated with jazz, and the expectation is that each musician will try something new each and every time he has the opportunity. A jazz musician is always “practicing” creativity, a behavior ingrained over many years of playing alone while practicing and also during live performances.

There's no doubt, however, that leaders of organizations today admit that instilling creativity in their everyday operations continues to be a challenging endeavor. Employees themselves often say that they do not believe that their companies give them opportunities to be creative in their day-to-day responsibilities. They point out that their job descriptions do not include any reference to thinking of new approaches to their work or new ideas. A job description typically outlines the most important technical or skill expectations associated with the job. As mentioned in the lesson on embracing complexity, the “skill” of being creative is very often relegated to certain groups or it's considered to only be the purview of “leadership.” But organizations that excel and continue to “reinvent” themselves realize the critical need to bring creativity to the forefront of all employees' daily work lives. Organizations must continually set the bar higher and find compelling points of differentiation. This takes the creative energies and talents of all employees. Simply said, creativity can be practiced every day in many ways.

Jazz musicians learn early on to develop their own techniques to foster their creativity. It actually starts with practicing their basic skills day in day out. The greater the level of their technical skills the more capacity they will have to be creative. But their path to improvisation evolves quickly as a result of experimentation, the freedom to make mistakes, and the internalization of new ideas they invent or pick up from others.

It's not impossible to implement creativity techniques within organizations. Processes to encourage creativity can be institutionalized. As part of our Performance Excellence launch at Disney theme parks and resorts, we created “circles of excellence” in all areas of operations in the pursuit of new ideas to surprise and delight our guests. Whether it was a housekeeping team, a guest services team or a grounds maintenance crew, it was aimed at capitalizing on the thoughts and suggestions of our cast members so that we could exceed our guests' expectations, not just meet them.

When we introduced these circles of excellences, employees were energized about this opportunity bring forward what sometimes were long held frustrations and concerns about guest service. They were excited to have a voice and a channel to bring about change and innovation. Whether it was an innovation of an existing program or a creative idea that led to some new and entertaining guest experience, the employees became more fully engaged, feeling a sense of ownership and pride in their work. Success stories were recognized and applauded in staff meetings and newsletters. Just as in jazz performances when individual musicians may be applauded for a great solo, individuals and teams were recognized for their creative contributions. Simple acts of recognition reinforce the power of creativity. Creativity doesn't need to be rocket science, it just has to be taken seriously.

At NAVTEQ, we introduced an Innovation Portal on our intranet to capture the creative ideas from employees working remotely in every region of the globe. We wanted a way to connect these employees and encourage them to contribute in a creative way. We sometimes started a “conversation” about an existing “process” or “product” that we knew needed to evolve to the next stage. Employees were asked to think creatively about ways to jump start the effort. Sometimes this was a very technical conversation and at other times it was innovative ways to market our products. Regardless, it proved to be a wonderful way to tap into our intellectual resources in a rapidly changing technology world.

Charles Mingus was a great jazz composer and once he said, “In jazz we have the audacity to think of ourselves as free and when you think of yourself as free, then you are free to challenge and break all of the paradigms.” Dave Brubeck famously recorded Take Five, written by his sax player Paul Desmond, by breaking a long-held rule in jazz. The rule was that most tunes are composed in 4/4 (i.e., 4 beats to the bar), a few are in 3/4, but overwhelmingly most tunes are 4 beats to the bar. Brubeck liked experimenting with different time signatures which was unconventional at the time. Take Five was born . . . simply because he and his musicians felt free enough to break a paradigm and try something new.

I’ve come to learn that if you want to live a creative life, the best way to start is to have a mindset that creativity has to be practiced every day and in every way. It starts with each of us knowing that we have within us the ability to think and act creatively. Your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions are uniquely yours to share and innovate. So, practice creativity!

LESSON 5: FOSTER A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

To truly have creativity and innovation take hold and thrive in an organization, there must be a collaborative environment. This is fundamental within a jazz ensemble. In fact, the Wikipedia site notes that collaboration between musicians, especially in regards to jazz, is often “heralded as the epitome of complex collaborative practice.”

Here’s an example of how my jazz group collaborated on a song I composed. It started with what I often do when I sit down at the piano to compose. I like to begin by thinking of something I’ve never heard or played before. I often attempt to come up with an idea that I know will be different . . . potentially dissonant, for example. Dissonance can be a source of creativity and leads to other ideas. I started playing with a dissonant interval (minor second) and found ways to resolve it leading to an interesting and haunting melody. I composed it as a ballad.

When the group got together to play this new tune, our percussionist approached it with Latin rhythms there were unfamiliar to me. This made the song so much more interesting and we had fun trying it out. Then in rehearsal our sax player surprised me by saying there’s one part in the middle, when we finish the melody, where there are 4 beats of silence. He suggested we should throw out the Latin rhythm and instead start to play swing. I thought it was kind of a radical idea but we tried it. As we continued playing and refining this tune, it became more interesting, very intense and different. It started with dissonance, but it turned out to be a very unique tune which today remains one of my favorite compositions. I called it Tempestad to represent the intensity and diversity of the communities in which we live today. (See video after these lessons).

Our collaboration on the tune came naturally to us. We had played together for a number of years. We had learned to respect each other's talents and ideas. We were used to playing in a truly collaborative environment, knowing that each of us was bringing something different to the group. We were comfortable with each other and felt good about sharing opinions with each other and me. They knew I would listen to their ideas, try them out and together we would build upon each other's input. Henry Ford said, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

Another sign of successful collaboration is how a group deals with mistakes and failure. When my jazz group gets together for rehearsals, mistakes are often made, especially when playing new tunes together. Because we have such a collaborative environment, there is openness and acceptance to mistakes and musical ideas that don't work out. In this environment mistakes often lead to a discovery of something new. The environment of jazz is so forgiving when it comes to taking risks and making mistakes.

This is what we need to create in non-musical settings. In order to collaborate successfully, a set of agreed upon values and behaviors are required. When we launched Performance Excellence at Disney 15 years ago, we decided to share the values and behaviors that we felt were part of the Disney legacy but were never clearly articulated and not always demonstrated. We knew that if we were to align everyone around our vision and mission and also increase our focus on guest and cast excellence, we had to establish accountability for each employee's behaviors.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE VALUES WE EMBRACED:

- Honesty: Deal with each other in a sincere and straightforward manner.
- Integrity: Act in a manner consistent with our words and beliefs.
- Respect: Treat others with care and consideration.
- Courage: Pursue our beliefs with strength and perseverance.
- Openness: Share information freely.
- Diversity: Seek, value and respect differences among our fellow Cast Members.

AND THE BEHAVIORS WE PRACTICED:

- Care about our fellow Cast Members.
- Work as a team.
- Foster creativity and innovation.
- Encourage risk-taking, realizing mistakes may happen.
- Find enjoyment and fun in our work.
- Assume responsibility beyond our individual roles.
- Be emotionally committed to Disney.

As you can see from this list, it includes much of what I described that has made our jazz group successful. While we did not necessarily talk about these values and behaviors when we first started playing jazz together, we demonstrated most if not all of them in some way as time went on. When employees in a group are demonstrating similar values and behaviors, they form a cohesive team that collaborates well.

With respect to creating a collaborative environment, I like to think of leaders as setting the stage for action. As the informal leader of my jazz group, I want to encourage positive and respectful relationships, communicate my expectations in how we will play together, and simply be the person that each one of them can count on to be supportive and caring. But once we are playing together, I am not the boss. One musician may set the tune, our drummer may set the tempo and another musician may be featured with his improvisation. We know to listen to each other and communicate through our eyes, our body language and our music. When this interaction occurs repeatedly as we play together, trust is built. And trust at the end of the day is the linchpin in fostering collaboration.

The beauty of collaboration is that when it works well there is no stopping the quest for creativity and innovation. One of my favorite Walt Disney quotes is one that you likely have never heard. When asked about his achievements and what made Disney so successful Walt said, “Many hands and hearts and minds usually contribute to one’s notable achievements. We share, to a large extent, one another’s fate. We create the circumstances that either allow us to succeed and achieve our objectives, or to fail.” It’s clear that Walt knew that it would take every employee to deliver on his vision of creating a place where happiness reigned. And he knew and clearly acknowledged that it would take many creative and innovative minds to achieve the level of excellence that is associated with Disney products and services. As a leader, he clearly set the stage for creativity and innovation that has endured for generation after generation. This was quite a testament to the art of collaboration. So, foster a collaborative environment!

In closing, I believe these are some valuable life lessons which I’ve extracted from playing jazz: simple lessons that can lead to profound results. I hope you find them useful . . . I know I have!