



Jazz-
Leadership
Penelope Tobin

IMAGINE THE SCENE: a basement nightclub, moody lighting, laid back atmosphere. And cool jazz playing. There, on the small stage, is a jazz quartet—piano, double bass, drums, and tenor saxophone. They sound sweet.

Well, look at that, you're up there playing! Choose your instrument, and settle into the swing of it.

The groove is driving forward, yet the music is totally relaxed. Now you're taking a solo. You're in flow, on purpose, exploring your ideas. The rest of the band are listening intently to everything you're saying; they punctuate, acknowledge, encourage you to say more, pick up your ideas, and feed you theirs in return.

Ok, freeze frame.

Take a look at the band. Who's the leader? If you watch an orchestra, you can spot the top dog right away. He (usually) is up on the podium, removed from the others, the only one with the complete "plan" in his hands. The jazz group, on the other hand, offers up no such easy clues. The leader is indistinguishable. Each player takes the limelight when it's their time to lead, and stands aside when it's another's. Behind the scenes, the jazz-leader is responsible for the vision and the strategy. But in performance, leadership and followership rotate.

Traditional leadership has long looked like the orchestral conductor. But we're living within a whirlwind of change, and the authoritarian individual, working to a fixed, detailed plan from a detached position of control, isn't equipped to deal with it. To survive these new circumstances, we must all learn how to improvise (from the Latin "improvises", meaning "not seen ahead of time").

We need leaders who:

- are great improvisers
- establish the best structures for uncertainty
- adapt to change in real time
- inspire others to co-create their vision of the future

We need leadership in a new groove. We need jazz-leadership.

"I used to think that running an organization was equivalent to conducting a symphony orchestra. But I don't think that's quite it; it's more like jazz. There is more improvisation."—WARREN BENNIS

Look back to the band. They're playing again. And there's a poster behind them advertising the gig. Aha, it's your quartet.

So you're the leader. What does it take to be a jazz-leader?

Let's take it from the top.

Jazz-Leaders Get Beyond the Past

You're not surprised by change—in fact, you seek it out. You work with uncertainty. Yes, tradition is important to you. You've dug deeply into it and spent years studying it. You've drawn from it. You refer to it. But you're not a historian. You've got beyond it.

If you need to, you reject the past entirely. And you encourage others to do the same—to challenge accepted norms, to question assumptions, to see limitations, and to move beyond them. Do you care if this means others in your group grow in their thinking, and become leaders in their own right? You care if they do not! To you, “employee churn” means it's time for new ideas and fresh collaboration.

The continuum that matters to you is:

- learning from the past
- moulding that learning through personal experience
- expressing this experience through the individual voice
- combining this voice with others, to benefit an “idea in the middle”

You live in a place of constant learning. There is no arriving, only forever unfurling. “It never, never ends” said Michel Petrucciani, and fellow pianist Joe Sample agrees: “You’re in that constant state of being a student.” Learning is each individual player’s responsibility, from start to finish, lifelong. You believe that continuous, self-directed learning is essential, particularly as the pace of change accelerates.

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Jazz-Leaders Create Empathic Environments

You know how to balance the individual voice with group collaboration. You create environments where everyone is heard, where there’s mutual understanding between all the players, where empathy breeds. This isn’t because you’re kind; it’s because you’re pragmatic.

You’re in the business of change, of improvisation, of “playing extemporaneously ... composing on the spur of the moment,” as jazz historian Gunther Schuller defines it. And this doesn’t

happen without empathy. Each individual's attention must not only be on their own music, on their own perspective, but also on what everyone else in the group is saying, on the overall soundscape that's being produced. As a jazz-leader, you recognise that it requires persistent concentration and deep, active listening to produce a space where ideas emerge and evolve.

“Keep listening. Never become so self-important that you can’t listen to other players.”—JOHN COLTRANE

When you communicate with the rest of the group, you aim to inspire, not dictate. Yes, sometimes it's a challenge. After all, a jazz-leader is responsible for carrying the vision, and you're passionate about it. But you set aside any knee-jerk inclination to impose your will. You've hired players for what they have to offer, and you must provide the space that allows them to deliver it. Everyone participates, collaborates, and contributes.

Jazz-Leaders Foster a Culture of Trust

Improvisation entails error. This is a given. Mistakes are an essential part of invention, creativity, experimentation, innovation, and improvisation. As saxophonist Coleman Hawkins said, “If you don't make mistakes you aren't really trying.”

Along with mistakes, other regular but unpredictable visitors to the improviser include mediocrity, “off” days, and looking foolish. To compound the challenge, everything happens under the scrutiny of peers and in the public gaze. The improviser can’t cop out, hide errors or shift blame.

Although mistakes are inevitable in life, as in art, we’re discouraged from making them from an early age. Shame gets attached to them. And so, fearing mistakes, people play small. The improviser has to get beyond this; it’s part of the job. To this end, the jazz-leader fosters a culture of trust. You recruit your team with the utmost care, making sure that new hires have the necessary hard and soft skills, along with personal ambitions that are aligned to the group, to the vision. Then you trust that everyone’s intention is to produce their best work.

When one’s work has intense personal meaning, and is also a hotbed for errors, the inner critic is powerful and ever present. Part of the improviser’s journey entails taming their inner critic and disempowering the outer critics that feed it. They know that their best work is not borne of the hectoring judgement of a critic—internal or external. They must learn how to manage their inner critic, so it provides the motivation to progress, spurring them to “tell the truth as I see it” (Wynton Marsalis), rather than comply with acceptable, limiting opinions. The jazz-leader is sensitive to this. You intimately understand the individual’s capacity to self-critique. So you rarely offer feedback. But when you do, you encourage rather than admonish, enthuse rather than put down, and express belief rather than doubt.

Check out the band. One of the other musicians is now taking a solo. Watch how you and the rest of the players respond. What allows this constant flow of unspoken appraisal, feedback and adjustment that the players make of themselves and each other?

If anyone makes a mistake during performance, the others will be there to guide them, to clarify and resolve. Trust is the foundation that allows risks to be taken, ideas to be tried out, and errors either to be forgotten immediately or to be picked up and explored, building tension that takes the performance somewhere unexpected.

Trust is sucked out of performance when vampires such as bullying, malicious gossip, and ostracism infiltrate the performance space. The jazz-leader is sensitive to these behaviours, removing them as soon as they're spotted. Do you always see them? No, they can be covert and you're not infallible. But you're alert, because you know it's impossible to build a winning organisation when even one individual is an enervating influence. Negativity is contagious, subtly inciting a downward cycle, and eroding trust.

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As a jazz-leader you understand that the freedom of improvisation can only flow from the stability of trust. That's why you provide clear structures and unambiguous support, allowing everyone to take risks and fail, to explore new possibilities, to be self-expressive while working with others on combined tasks. You build a culture of trust that enables the individual voice to be heard and developed, while uniting with others through a shared vision, and collaborating for the common good.

Jazz-Leaders Create Structures That Hold Freedom

The jazz process, as the jazz lifestyle, can be misinterpreted by the casual observer. Many believe that improvisation is a spontaneous, random outpouring. Wrong. It's highly structured. It's a model for managing uncertainty. The structure constrains but doesn't dictate—rather it's the canvas upon which imagination comes to life.

Look again at the band. You're now playing a slow ballad, full of emptiness, breath, shadows, subtle interplay. What enables this unfolding? What are the structures that support it?

Before each player comes into the performance space—the collaborative workspace—they’ve undertaken extensive exploration. You know how many years you’ve studied, practiced, thought-through, listened, experimented... usually in isolation.

Mastering and up-keeping the technical demands of your instrument is just the beginning. The lifelong learning of jazz is also filled with mapping the galaxy of musical structures and systems you’ll explore—the keys, chords, scales and modes; the time signatures, rhythms, tempos; the forms, styles, sounds and genres. You study in order to be free, so you’re equipped to roam through this multi-dimensional experience, making sense of infinite possibility, and joining others who are on their own similar journeys. In any organisation, collaboration and improvisation can only happen with the understanding that everyone has done, and continues to do, their personal, solitary, exploratory work.

Each improviser also comes to the work space with an intimate understanding of the role they play in the collaborative process, as well as those that others play. The jazz-leader believes that the individual must understand their part in the whole if they’re to have a sense of responsibility and purpose. How can someone be fully connected to their work if they’ve no idea why their role matters and how it fits within the ensemble? And how can they understand their role, if they don’t also understand everyone else’s? The boundaries of these roles and responsibilities are accepted, because they enable everyone’s independence and the interdependence.

“I want to be involved with my own musical problems, so I expect the others in the group to be attuned to me, and to know instinctively what their role is.”—BILL EVANS

So improvisers enter the collaborative process prepared with technical ability, theoretical know-how, their individual voice, and an understanding of everyone’s roles and responsibilities. Then it’s up to you, the jazz-leader, to establish the over-arching structure within which the exploration and possible innovation can happen. You provide clear, impersonal guidelines that encourage considered risk-taking and allow each player to express themselves. Within this organised context, the work is shaped by the group, to evolve into an idea in the middle—something built on but moving beyond an original vision, created by everyone involved

Your approach to structure doesn’t merely anticipate change; it is designed for change. You provide a shared orientation, but then everyone must be ready to both lead and to follow, anticipating the unexpected from themselves and others, prepared for constant change. Everyone takes responsible risks, contributes their own perspective, and responds to others’ directions. The jazz-leader knows how to engage their team completely.

Jazz-Leaders Find the Groove

Why do jazz musicians work so hard when their rewards appear—from the outside—to be so few? Pianist John Lewis said, “The reward for playing jazz is playing jazz.” For an improviser, the years of study, practice, and performance are not merely a route to making a living—they’re to achieve an extraordinary state that’s reached from time to time. This state of being is such a delight that it makes all striving worthwhile. It’s the state when, as trumpeter Art Farmer describes it—along with many others—“you forget yourself, you get to the point where the music doesn’t come from you, it comes through you.” Saxophonist Sonny Rollins is “able to step outside myself and hear what I’m playing”; while vocalist Bobby McFerrin describes the experience as “watching it happen as it happens.” And for pianist Bill Evans “those other high levels that happen just occasionally are really thrilling.” This state doesn’t happen every day—maybe not every week or even every month—but it’s often enough to inspire a powerful, personal commitment to excellence, and an inner drive to progress.

“Because you never know when the revelations will come to you, you have to practice every day.”—BARRY HARRIS

The jazz-leader knows that being “on purpose” is what motivates all improvisers. In fact, it’s the state of self-actualisation that motivates all human beings.

Most organisations have yet to realise this. Which is why most employees are disenchanted with their work; it lacks meaning and purpose for them. But any work can be meaningful and provide purpose. And any organisation, however large, can design a culture that enables this state, by setting up the conditions that foster it. The jazz-leader knows that this not only enhances the well-being of each individual, but it also produces their best work and engages them. This leads to peak group performance and improved productivity for the organisation.

Jazz-leaders capitalize on the exhilaration that human beings feel from self-actualisation, from the drive for personal excellence that it engenders, and the levels of performance that it produces. You hold the strategic vision while building a relationship culture, so individuals can be intrinsically motivated and personally fulfilled, while working collaboratively.

Using these simple guiding principles, the jazz-leader always gets great, always gets progress, and occasionally gets exceptional.

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Look again at the band. It's the last tune of the night. And you're blowing up a storm!! As the final note fades away, you introduce the players one last time. Each one takes a bow. Each one has given their all. And each one—yourself included—is already looking forward to being at work again tomorrow.

Imagine if everyone could have that feeling every day.

Jazz-leadership makes it possible. 🎷

“At the heart of jazz is the need to communicate, to be part of something greater than oneself, to reach some eternal values ... immutable values in the universe that we experience as often chaotic and full of change.”

—DANNY ZEITLIN

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Penelope Tobin is founder and CEO of Barrier Breakers, a social enterprise based in London, England. Barrier Breakers provides soft skills training and consultancy based on her award-winning approach, Barrier Breakers Methodology for Soft Skills Development and Evaluation (BBM), which identifies and removes the barriers that block human potential. Before becoming a committed soft skills advocate and activist, she was a professional musician, first weaving through an array of infamous pop and rock bands as keyboard player while doing her jazz apprenticeship. Then, as a jazz pianist, composer, and vocalist, she fronted groups based in London and New York that gigged around the globe. Always an active educator, she now coaches, consults and speaks widely on BBM and the power of soft skills.

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