

## **Creative Teamwork and All That Jazz**

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Everyone in the business of business looking to understand the essence of team building could do no better than spend time in the presence of a professional group of improvisational jazz artists, watching and listening and contemplating the art and intellectual level of thinking that goes into their team production.

It happened that I had a real “light bulb” experience not long ago while enjoying the relaxation of musical listening. A jazz trio (saxophonist, guitarist, and bassist) was entertaining at a Sunday brunch, playing requests of nostalgic tunes for easy listening that were popular during the era of the Big Bands. After the melody or theme of the song was established together, each member would take a solo that improvised and elaborated the melody while the other two members played quiet support. It was not difficult to see their performance as a significant metaphor for effective, natural, harmonious, and productive teamwork that is so vital to business and other organizations.

I began to wonder whether members of the trio were even aware of the remarkable processes of thinking in which they were engaged. Except for an expression of focused pleasure and an occasional glance or nod of appreciation for some particularly creative interpretation, there seemed to be no visible communication between the artists, yet the outcome of their teamwork was a model for the unity of differences. Somehow in the integration of brain/mind/body/spirit each instrumentalist managed to fit his own separate piece into a pleasing unity with two other separate pieces. Three totally different instruments played with totally different kinesthetic skills by three totally different personalities and aesthetics with three different sets of feelings about the song’s melody and lyrics and evoked memories were creating a human harmony spontaneously and unrehearsed. Familiarity with theories of the structure of the human intellect and its myriad possibilities caused me to be quite stunned at this demonstration of the marvels of the human brain/mind.

Then it occurred to me to wonder whether the demonstration of the process of teamwork by a jazz trio could be analyzed as it applied to the search for teambuilding strategies in other places. Could the same principles be translated from sound to words in an articulation of guidelines for teamwork anywhere? The question was worth pursuing.

The trio was invited to a demonstration of their musical art and an invitation to discuss the process by which the separate parts integrated themselves into a positive team product.

After a few introductory tunes, the trio discussed the process of their art and answered questions from the listeners. It turned out that every one of the musicians was articulate, not only musically but also in terms easily translatable to teamwork any where it happens to be needed.

The process by which three individual musicians became a harmonious, balanced team was specific to the art of improvisational jazz, but had application to the art of team building. There were specific answers to the question, “Just how do you do it?”

“Above all, you listen carefully to the other players and are responsive; you share the leadership, i.e., when another member takes a solo, you support and encourage him. You have to be aware of your own mood and the mood of the other players. It helps to be able to interpret and even anticipate subtle communications during the performance. It is important to continue to practice and improve the skills of your particular musical art. It takes a lot of mental activity (intellect) to be conscious of all the nuances and spontaneous expression that can develop in the system when the interpretation of the musical message is largely unrehearsed and unpredictable. Experimentation and innovation stimulate and energize a jazz offering. Communication and empathy with the audience enriches the performance. Mutual respect and love for each other and for the shared musical soul of the group is the ultimate feature in the fabric of the jazz team.”

Applications of the process of improvisational professional jazz to team building in business are especially appropriate, since the dynamics of any team of individuals are complex and unpredictable. Musical performances that follow a rehearsed score would not apply. If teams in the work place could relate their task to the jazz process as described by a group of thoughtful, articulate musicians, their guidelines would probably go something like this:

- Listen carefully to everyone else. Be supportive.
- Balance the leadership and followership. Give everyone a chance to “solo.”
- Be sensitive to the moods (internal environments) of the others.
- Trust your intuitions.
- Risk expressing your ideas, even when you are not totally sure of them.
- Be “playful.” Lighten up and think smart simultaneously.
- Be open to new, experimental patterns and directions outside of the “square.”
- Bring the outside world into the picture. Think systemically.
- The heart and soul of business has a preferred opportunity for expression in the work of teams. Mutual love and respect helps to get the job done.

Maybe the best way to harmonize and motivate a team is to listen to a live improvisational jazz performance of relaxing, mellow music, everyone a separate artist, and very much together in their creation of a successful product.