

# Jazzthink Thought ! Provokers

## Innovation, Organizations, and Jazz

There has been an interesting shift in perspective among students of organizations and leadership in the last 20 years. Their understanding of innovation in organizations has changed. They recognize that successful organizations have to innovate a lot more often and a lot more quickly than used to be the case. One way this shift in perspective can be traced is by following their use of the metaphor of musical leadership for organizational leadership.

In Peter Drucker's 1988 article, "The Coming of the New Organization," he discusses the unique characteristics of organizations as they attempt to survive in the emerging world of the "information-based organization." One of the images he used to describe the organization of the future was the symphony orchestra, having many different skilled workers all reporting to the one CEO - the conductor. These players are specialists and therefore the conductor, who may not even have the skills to play every instrument, has the responsibility to maintain the common vision or score for each part.

Lee Faller took Drucker's image one step further. Each group of instruments, he suggested, is really a self-managed team. But although each section is somewhat self-managed, they must ultimately report to the conductor. As middle management contracts and knowledge workers become more self-managed, the nature of leadership changes. Just as a good conductor must have a complete score, a good leader must instill a common vision for all of his or her workers, instead of only performing as a task manager.

In the 1990s, a number of organizational scholars began to question the symphonic conductor metaphor, noting that the idea of a pre-scripted musical score and a single conductor as leader was limited, especially given the ambiguity and high turbulence that many managers experience. Karl Weick suggested the jazz band was a better image for organizations in a world that demanded rapid response and adaptability around some core business competencies.


Frank J. Barrett followed Weick's lead and explored jazz improvising as an example of how an organization could be designed for maximizing learning and innovation. A jazz musician himself who once played with the Tommy Dorsey band, Barrett saw the jazz band as a good model for a group of diverse specialists living in a chaotic, turbulent environment making fast, irreversible decisions, highly interdependent on one another to interpret equivocal information and dedicated to innovation and the creation of novelty. Jazz players do what managers find themselves doing these days: fabricating and inventing novel responses without a pre-scripted plan and without certainty of outcomes. They discover and create the future as their actions unfold.

At Jazzthink, we have been playing with these ideas with our clients for several years now and the learning just keeps on coming. The richness of jazz as a metaphor for organizational performance in our complex and frenzied business environment is inexhaustible.

Frank J. Barrett, "Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations for Organizational Learning," *Organization Science*, 9 (Sept/Oct 1998) 5.

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Lee M. Faller, "Exiting Cubicles and Igniting Creativity: The Effects of the Organizational Climate on Innovation in the Workplace," *Kravis Leadership Institute Leadership Review*, (Winter 2002).

Karl Weick, "Agenda setting in organizational behavior: a theory focused approach," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 1 (Sept 1992) 3. 

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