Innovation = All That Jazz?
Don Creswell, SmartOrg

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, I spent a lot of time immersed in music, listening to a legendary box set featuring Miles Davis (The Quiet Sessions); improvising jazz at the piano; watching a DVD course on the Mathematics of Music (The Great Courses) and listening to an NPR broadcast featuring Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra demonstrating the basics of big-band jazz. Coincidentally, I returned to the office and was intrigued by several articles in the Innovation Excellence blog that related innovation to jazz. Suddenly everything came together: innovation and jazz share many characteristics that contribute to success.

There are many kinds of jazz, ranging from ragtime to Dixieland to New Orleans to Afro-Cuban to bebop and beyond. With the exception of early ragtime, which was often composed by such greats as Scott Joplin, jazz is characterized by improvisation around an underlying structure. The goal of a group of jazz musicians is to use the structure as a foundation, playing within and around the structure while keeping it all together within the group of players, whether the group is as small as a trio or as large as a big band.

Innovation when successful is like jazz improvisation. There is a starting point (ideation); in jazz this may be a song or series of chords. Then there is “incubation” where the innovative idea is tried out; in jazz this involves playing through the structure to form a foundation. From there, experimentation follows. The process is of value in innovation as well as in jazz. The successful innovation team develops and tests alternatives, gains feedback, learns and builds on success. This is much the same in a jazz group; musicians listen to one another and build on the interplay, refocusing as play continues.

It is unfortunate that many organizations, rather than following the jazz metaphor, act more like symphonic orchestras, with carefully prescribed management structures that greatly inhibit successful innovation. A recent blog post in Innovation Excellence cited a quote from Carl StØrmer, a musician and business consultant who “realized that business organizations operated a lot like classical music, with structure dictating action rather than the other way around.” His work led to a Harvard Case Study that relates the music of Miles Davis to organizational decision making.

Managers must create an environment where ideas are discussed and respected. They should also empower employees, partners, and customers to experiment with new ideas. I love when an employee comes to me with an idea. I give them the resources and time to develop and prototype their recommendations. If there is value, we invest more, if not, we move on. Innovation can be that simple!

— Gerald Cox
Organizer
Second Line Conference (New Orleans)
Returning to the jazz metaphor, another observation in the Innovation Excellence blog post “Unlocking the Jazz Code” makes a lot of sense to me: “While jazz ensembles do have leaders, status and hierarchy are devalued while listening and awareness are prized. This helps take fear out of the equation and promotes creativity. If one team member misses a note, the others react to it not as a mistake, but as an opportunity to create something new.” Miles Davis, it has been reported, once observed that “if you hit a wrong note in jazz, hit it again twice as hard so everyone thinks you meant it the first time.”

Innovation Excellence also cited the work of Penelope Tobin of Barrier Breakers. Penelope is a jazz pianist, vocalist and composer and business consultant. I particularly liked her summation:

“Using jazz as a business model is more about how organizations can respond effectively to change, about having the best organizational structures for today’s environment. Business needs structure, but the structures must be at the service of what’s going on within the business, rather than being the master, and they must be adaptable enough to respond to change. The jazz-leader establishes clearly defined boundaries, roles and responsibilities, plus the overall vision, which everyone then works within as individuals, speaking with their own voice. This fully engages everyone, as not only are they being heard and shaping the outcome, but they have to listen keenly to others in order to respond – that’s improvisation. They’re not following a pre-written score, or playing pre-rehearsed licks. It’s uncomfortable; certainly...as is the seismic change we’re going through. But it’s also exhilarating, and it’s possible when the structures are supportive.”

An innovation model recently developed by David Matheson based on work with SmartOrg clients, uses the metaphor of a bird searching for a nest (ideation), followed by laying eggs, some of which hatch to produce fledglings who need to be nurtured to learn how to fly through a series of experiments (formulation and incubation); some fall from the nest, but others learn how to fly and soar. The metaphor, like the jazz metaphor, describes a process for freeing innovation from the tyranny of rigidity, significantly raising the probability for successful innovation.

Here is an example of jazz innovation during a live performance by Herby Hancock.

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