

Jazzifying Management

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Lessons for Innovators from Arts & Sciences

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Due to economic, social, and technologic evolutions the challenges managers are nowadays confronted with are getting more and more complex. Not only is the external environment changing in an accelerating manner, but also internal structures and processes are becoming hardly comprehensible and understandable. Dealing with such situations oftentimes demands creative and innovative management approaches. Expectably, a lot of research has been done analyzing what specific managerial behavior constitutes the success of organizations and decision-makers in such settings, trying to find generalizable insights for the management practice. Thereby, researchers commonly focus on observing the behavioral patterns of those individuals or teams being involved in decision-making processes within an economical context. However, examining individuals from outside the business world who also need to cope with complex systems might yield promising

insights in equal measure. The essay at hand attempts to address exactly that by illustrating how musicians within the most complex form of music – namely jazz – unfold their creative and innovative potential. This seems to be auspicious especially due to the fact that jazz musicians are not only able to manage and control jazz, but more importantly generate creative and innovative performances precisely because of the prevailing complexity. Hence, analyzing how jazz musicians gain, maintain and apply their specific abilities might not only be a propitious way to derive management implications for unleashing the innovative potential among employees and teams but also shows how managers themselves can deal with today's complex environments and organizations.

Different from classical, pop or any other form of music, live performances of a jazz song never sound but nearly alike. Even if the same artist plays, there will be substantial differences from previous and succeeding performances. Every play is, thus, a unique and innovative musical tune. Before playing a jazz song musicians mostly just agree on what song in what key to play and off they go. And sometimes they not even do that bit of prior coordination. Just one of them starts and the others join in, not knowing where they will eventually end up. Consequently, jazz musicians are somehow able to rapidly create a highly creative, adaptive, and harmonic piece of art within an extremely complex environment. Thereby it seems that jazz musicians simultaneously possess several often-opposing abilities, which are also essential for the work of managers – creativity, analytics, disruption, coherence, and reliability.

Before being able to derive and concretize the insights for management practice, those characteristics of jazz music representing the analogies to the business world have to be known first and will, hence, be described in more detail within the following sections. In a nutshell, four unique aspects can be identified. Besides a very broad and diverse set of harmonies forming the musical foundation, groove (rhythm), improvisation, and Blue Notes constitute the very nature of jazz. And even though it is probably hard to see on first sight, everything within jazz follows explicit rules and structures. But exactly these rules and structures allow musicians to unfold as much of their creative and innovative potential as possible.

First, the broad and diverse *set of harmonies* within jazz music is decisive for the inexhaustibility of musical works and, thus, the wide range of different jazz styles that have emerged. At the same time, however, this diversity is causing most of the complexity. It offers musicians a high variety of scales, chords, and cadences to work with. And in order to navigate and play along in all of these different styles of jazz, musicians have to internalize all harmonies available and must be able to combine those notes to melodic patterns that fit to the harmony currently being played.

The rhythm is the backbone of every jazz tune. Besides the set of harmonies, it is another pillar band members can rely on and get back to. It is the cohesive element binding everything together. The specificity of jazz rhythms is that they are created through changing common rhythms by accentuating the intermediate, actually unaccentuated beats. This divergence between rhythm and meter can either ease or raise tension, thereby creating the so-called *groove*, the second individual characteristic commonly known for jazz. However, the groove can only unfold its effect, if it is played continually in the background. This is either covered by the whole rhythm section or on a rotating basis by single instruments like the drum, bass, guitar, or piano.

At the beginning of each tune, band members find their individual groove within which they can start to burgeon. Once they have found it, single musicians start with the third very distinctive aspect of jazz: *improvisation*. Within this concrete process of improvisation, soloists play and compose music at the same time, thereby deploying all of their creativity. But they do not off-handedly start playing something. On the contrary, every note they pick fits exactly to the notes played before as well as to what the other band members currently play. This requires not only the comprehensive knowledge of harmonies described above but also as much practice, confidence, and team work as possible. By playing specific patterns of chords and cadences, the other band members provide the basic structure of a song, thereby offering a certain pathway in which the improvisation can unfold. This pathway can change throughout a song and might be different depending on the background and skills of the other musicians constituting the band. Thus, the quality and breadth of a song highly depends on the composition of musicians and how well these can work together. If soloists leave the given pathways, they create disharmonious sounds. But if they stay within, they have the freedom to pick their notes from whatever harmony there is.

Within this spectrum of sounds, jazz harmonies additionally include notes that deviate from the established tonal system of the western world – the *Blue Notes*. They constitute the fourth very own and individual character of jazz. Blue Notes are precisely defined notes being played at a slightly lower pitch than that of the major scale. They, thus, break with the fundamental harmonic system creating something new.

Being creative and innovative in such complex, rapidly changing, and always evolving musical tunes, musicians basically need to internalize three things: i) the ability to combine and apply a certain individual skill set, ii) intuition, and iii) team work.

Jazz musicians first of all have to know the harmonies of all different kinds of musical styles. This provides them with the necessary repertoire of tools to use while improvising as well as adapting to other musicians. Besides that, they need practical experience and intuition to have a feeling for where the other band members are heading to and how to integrate ones own style. This process of musical evolution during a song is happening in just a glimpse and cannot be handled on a purely analytical basis. Rather, combining the internalized knowledge of what harmonic patterns fit together with the intuition and experience gained, constitutes the ability to apply that knowledge rapidly, trusting that it will work out eventually. At the same time, the quality of a tune being played equally depends on the members forming the band, their specific individual styles and moods as well as the situation or atmosphere of the moment. Jazz music is, hence, a living system, which develops in an unforeseeable way. Being open towards this development, letting loose of trying to control, just observing, joining and co-creating the moment, thereby relying on ones own intuition is essential for playing jazz. The final result will depend on the way band members interact, whether they are open to each other and fit together. If someone changes directions during the play, the other members must trust and follow and – if intended – change direction again. Either back to where they started or somewhere totally else. This is how new and innovative sounds evolve.

Having detected both, the characteristics constituting the very nature and complexity of jazz as well as the abilities musicians must possess in order to be creative and innovative within this highly complex musical system, it is tempting to search for implications that

can be deduced for the management practice. To find promising answers, the focus has to be drawn on how exactly the identified abilities enable musicians to cope with the characteristics of jazz and how these findings can be transferred to the business world.

Similar to the diversified set of harmonies in jazz music, managers dealing with complex internal and external environments are confronted with a huge amount of different management tools each one being designed for more or less explicit strategic and operational challenges. By considering external complexity, as for example the competitive, political, social or technological environment, it is obvious that due to the ongoing development, more and more aspects have to be considered, thereby raising the overall complexity from a management point of view. For analyzing and managing the different environmental aspects managers have to at least know and ideally be able to apply the different tools provided by science. The same accounts for the internal environment, such as product portfolios, production networks, or customer segments. But it is not only about knowing and applying the different tools and instruments but also about the ability to pick the right one, depending on the concrete situation of the moment as well as the specific organizational conditions. Thus, first of all a certain knowledge base of not only the analytical repertoire available but also the organization itself, its environment as well as the interplay between the latter two is indispensable to cope with today's complexity. If managers do not internalize this comprehensive knowledge base, they will not be able to understand the sources and effects of complexity on their organization and, hence, will not be able to initiate the necessary steps to manage it; be it reduction, prevention or control.

Besides this pure knowledge and analytical skills, the success of managing complex systems is in the end often dependent on improvisation and innovation, meaning entering unwritten territory. It is about being creative, letting loose of traditional structures, formalization, and how things have been managed before. It is also about managers blanking out how they think others expect them to behave. Being innovative demands breaking with the existent. It takes a great amount of skills, concentration, and creed to do it. As improvisation in jazz wouldn't work without a clear fundamental structure and teamwork behind, the same accounts for the management practice. Within jazz, grooves and harmonies provides that structure. As noted, they constitute the pillars every musician can rely on and get back to. In the business context, management tools and instrument as described above constitute one of the pillars – the set of harmonies. The other backbone is provided by the fundamental norms and values the members of the organization agree upon – the groove. They constitute what a manager or any member of the organization can rely on. Unfolding creativity, innovativeness, and rapid decision-making demands providing norms and values which allow team members to trust their gut feeling, leaving predefined mental models, breaking with established patterns of behavior, trying out something new and – if failed – getting back to the point they started from, maybe afterwards trying out something else. They encourage finding the organization's specific Blue Notes; those elements making an organization unique and by that unfolding its individuality and competitive potential. At the same time, norms and values connect. They make other members and the organization reliable, thus, providing a cohesive element and pathway within which creativity and innovativeness can evolve.

Managers being embedded in a system that encourages creative thinking while at the same time being equipped with a broad knowledge of the available management tools, the organization, its environment as well as their interconnection do not necessarily make high-quality management decisions. Besides pure analytical skills and creative potential, managers oftentimes have to trust and rely on their pure gut feeling, or more precisely their intuition. Similar to the context of jazz, this intuition is based on as much practice and training as possible. It provides managers with the necessary experience to be confident regarding their instincts. Intuition is essential in complex and dynamic environments in which decisions contingently have to be made at a fast pace. For jazz musicians, intuition is the feeling or confidence that a certain sound or melody will raise the intended tension or mood and that playing along with band members will eventually work out well. This intuition is based on exercise, applying all different kinds of harmonies and melodies in different settings and working together with as many other musicians as possible, thereby gaining experience in how others behave and act individually or within groups. In a management context this intuition means recognizing that the strategy or operations of an organization have to be analyzed or changed in a certain direction as well as what other team members or employees it needs to successfully manage this change. Even though intuition is oftentimes derided, it is an indispensable management ability and eventually built on a high level of practical experience. In applying different kinds of management tools and working together with a high variety of different people, managers gain, maintain and apply their analytical as well as social skills, thereby bringing their intuition to perfection. Afterwards it is about trusting it.

Summing up what has been stated above, there are three essential things managers can learn from jazz musicians. First and foremost, it is almost needless to say that the quality of management decisions fundamentally depends on the breadth and diversity of the analytical knowledge base – the set of harmonies. This is the basis each decision is grounded on. And the broader the knowledge base managers have, the more differentiated they can think and act, which is essential especially when dealing with complex environments. But it is not just about analytical skills. It is also about being creative in combining these abilities to something bigger – improvising – while, whenever necessary, breaking with the existent and creating something new – the Blue Notes. This provides the manager and eventually the organization with its recognizable idiosyncrasy, so important in today's highly competitive markets. Third, during the moments of improvising and finding ones own Blue Notes, managers have to rely on two things: one being the structure and rules of the organization – groove – and the second one being its own gut feeling – intuition. While the former one is provided by the underlying norms and values organizational members developed and agree upon, the latter is developing confidence in ones own instinct.

In the end, jazzifying management means combining analytical competence with creative potential while making sure to be embedded in a team that perfectly adapts to each other and at the same time provides as much freedom for the individual as possible. In this way, managers will be enabled to consider complexity just as jazz musicians do: the property of a system that, besides having to be managed and controlled, offers the great potential to build something creative and innovative.