

Jazz Impact brings musical concepts to the business world

Michael Gold has been a professional bass player, a teacher, the head of a construction company, a college administrator and a professor. Now he's putting it all together as founder of his own company, Jazz Impact.

Jazz Impact combines Gold's passion for jazz music with his knowledge of the business community's need for innovation and creativity in a fast-changing workplace.

"I began to understand that people [in business] are always improvising," he said. "There may be protocols; there may be rules, but people are always improvising."

Gold got hooked on jazz as a teenager. He always liked music, but had gotten bored with the rock-and-roll craze of the late 1960s because he felt it stunted artistic creativity. He heard Charlie Parker when he was 14 years old and was hooked.

"It changed everything about the way I thought about music, art and myself," he said. "It changed my life; I embraced jazz as a way of life."

He spent two decades as a professional bass player in New York. But then he got older, married and started a family, and the traveling involved in performance began taking its toll. So he began work on a doctorate in music history and for the next seven years, he worked the string of jobs.

Then, in 1998, he was contacted by an old friend.

Gold had performed with Chris Teasdale when both were musicians in New York. Teasdale, now process engineering director for the optical networking group at Murray Hill, N.J.-based Lucent Technologies Inc., called and asked Gold to create a program to help employees open up their creative thinking. Jazz Impact was born.

What better way to teach people how to improvise and create than jazz music?

"My initial reaction was 'Bang!' that is a great idea," he said.

The division at Lucent was struggling and going through some changes, and its employees needed a way to open up their minds to creative thinking, said Teasdale.

Adaptability

Gold, who from time to time also still performs at clubs throughout town, now has four regular clients and is negotiating with several others. They range from the \$33.6-billion giant Lucent to the Hennepin County non-profit homeless shelter People Serving People. He'll soon start spending days grinding coffee beans, greeting customers and selling coffee for Starbucks in preparation for several shows with the Java giant.

The presentations usually consist of a main seminar followed by breakout sessions, although the programs are tailored to company needs. They encompass such tried and true topics as listening skills, team-building and creativity. The program generally costs about \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Customers seem to like what they see. Testimonials on Gold's Web site credit Jazz Impact for its creative and original approach to its "perfect balance of entertainment and messengering."

After his performance at People Serving People, employees asked to have him back in the future, said Annette Rodriguez, organizational resources manager and organizer of the Jazz Impact training.

Teasdale agreed. At Lucent, Gold kicked off a three-day session during which officials were discussing strategic changes the company would be making. "The music brought them together in a way that allowed them to think about the objectives they were working on in the business sense," he said.

"The lecture Michael put together plus the actual demonstration ... were really extraordinary," Teasdale said.

One artist would play an improvisational piece, then another player would follow. The Jazz Impact performance was accompanied by discussions of how the musicians worked together and interchanged leader and follower roles and how those principals can be applied in the corporate world.

Teasdale wouldn't go so far as to credit Gold with the changes that took place during the meetings that followed. But he said Jazz Impact was a factor in opening the employees' minds to thinking with a new approach.

"It was really illustrative of a group of individuals not following a script but producing an outcome that was highly pleasurable," he said.

People Serving People brought in Jazz Impact for a different reason. The nonprofit teaches the homeless the skills they will need to get jobs. Gold talked to PSP employees about alternative methods of reaching the people they are trying to help, Rodriguez said.

"It adds a whole new dimension we are really in need of," she said, adding that Gold's seminar was about helping employees with their jobs but also enriching their spirits.

"If we are not excellent employees here, we cannot be excellent to our clients," she said.

Creative expansion

Nationwide, companies are using ongoing employee training as a retention tool, said Pat Galagan, editor-in-chief of Alexandria, Va.-based Training & Development magazine.

Jazz Impact is just one of many unique methods companies are using to train their workers.

"There are many more creative approaches to training than there were 10 years ago," Galagan said. "There are many ways to teach people things."

One health-care company brought in method actors to show staff their patients' perspective, Galagan said. Other companies bring in comedians to assist in building self-confidence in sales staff.

At Eagan-based Northwest Airlines Corp., the company spent a year training its employees to work better together. The sessions combined traditional methods with newer twists such as a movie about a Seattle-based seafood company that plays catch with its wares.

"If it works for the company, if it achieves the company's goals, it's fine," Galagan said.

But teaching -- not good times -- are the goal, and Galagan added that while there are many ways to train people, few companies have actually started using these methods. Most companies stick to the tried and true, she said.

At Lucent and other cutting-edge companies, the training breaks down about 80-20, Teasdale said -- about 80 percent traditional classroom-style training and motivational speakers to 20 percent creative and unique methods.

The Jazz Impact-like programs are thrown in to break the usual training routine and give people a new way of looking at their jobs. "You come back and say 'That wasn't half bad,'" Teasdale said.

Others think these methods will gain more acceptance. Employees put more energy into work when they have an emotional attachment -- something Jazz Impact seems to provide. "People are needing more -- people are needing more in their jobs and people are needing more in their spirit," Rodriguez said.

Gold agrees. In today's Internet-driven business society, information is readily available to everyone, meaning that employee creativity is going to set firms apart, he said.

"Creativity does not exist in a vacuum," he said. "I think the more it is experienced, the more critical the corporation will realize this is."

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