

All That Jazz

Jazz as a metaphor for business? It's not such a stretch, says musician and motivator Michael Gold.



At about the time that the modern corporation was being born, so too was modern jazz. For nearly a century, the two have evolved in almost completely separate worlds - until now.

Jazz Impact, based in Minneapolis, brings seminars to companies in a variety of industries that are designed to inspire new thinking on business and management. Featuring a world-class professional jazz ensemble, these motivational seminars combine compelling performance, practical insights into organizational dynamics, and hands-on interaction to improve an organization's response to change.

Jazz Impact's founder (and bassist) Michael Gold believes that jazz and business have always had more in common than one might think, and he is proving that jazz can be used to teach people to be more flexible and innovative in their business practice. A

former teacher with a master's degree and a Ph.D. in music, Gold created and ran the jazz program at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and headed the music department at the New Lincoln School in New York. But Gold has also helped to manage his family's commercial real estate management and development company, and his résumé includes a stint as operations manager of a financial services firm. In his soul, though, Gold is a jazz musician, and he has endeavored now to fuse the worlds of music, business, and education into a breakthrough methodology for improving organizational performance.

Quite simply, Gold explains, jazz is a metaphor for organizational dynamics, and he uses the music to teach and inspire in ways that go deeper than the usual training seminar or keynote at a meeting. Gold tailors the 90-minute program to his clients' unique situations, focusing on why improvisation is critical in business and the skills needed to do it. And he turns the employees in the audience into participants to give the experience context.

Making Sense Through Sound

"As jazz musicians, we make impactful decisions in the moment without the luxury of premeditation," Gold explains. "Every decision has a cascading effect on everything else that happens and everyone who participates, including the audience, [who is also] the customer. Yet we don't look at what we're doing as decision-making but as 'sense-making.'"

The distinction, he adds, is the difference between making decisions from one's personal point of view and acting from a global sense of the organization's ecology - being aware that any decision you make, from the smallest to the most consequential, will immediately affect the complex, ever-changing web of dynamic relationships that comprise the modern organization. For both the jazz ensemble and the business enterprise, successful 'sense-making' means responding to change with innovation.

Jazz, Gold adds, is "innovative response to change," and dozens of companies, from Starbucks and Razorfish to General Mills and Johnson & Johnson, have embraced that innovative response after experiencing the Jazz Impact program. The skills required for collaborative business innovation are the same kinds of skills required for jazz. According to Jazz Impact's Web site (www.jazz-impact.com), the seminars and workshops allow the audience to consider the connections between flexibility (speed in reaction to marketplace changes), innovative thinking (breakthrough responses to competitive challenges), creative productivity (decrease in production time), mindfulness (increased employee retention), and collaborative skills (increased teaming across corporate boundaries and an increase in quality). Other topics that may be worked into the program include listening skills, team-building, time management, creativity, and working in a diverse environment.

"Jazz is the only modern art form that has reached beyond itself in defining a system of collaborative improvisation," Gold insists. "Jazz is the sound of people negotiating change. It's an international language for fusing design, manufacturing, and implementation into one multifaceted process. The tools jazz musicians use embody a tradition



based on the principles of alignment, self-initiative, experimentation, and cross-functional understanding - principles that have become imperatives for business in the 21st century."

These are not altogether new ideas. Business theorists have been working with jazz and improvisation as metaphors for business since the late 1990s. The Vancouver Academy of Management sponsored a Jazz Symposium in 1998, and the journal *Organization Science* has published a number of papers on the subject. Karl E. Weick, of the University of Michigan's School of Business Administration, in particular, has made significant contributions that inform Gold's approach to the work. But Jazz Impact has brought the ideas to practical life by bringing the music itself into the seminar. For the full impact of the ideas, you have to hear how the music embodies the organizing principles.

Jazz Impact uses the jazz ensemble as a metaphorical corporate entity, applying the roles within the ensemble to those within a high-performance company. In doing this, Gold consciously builds on the innovative organizational genius of Louis Armstrong, who invented the basic structure of the jazz group and defined the language for improvisation. Jazz has been evolving from this fundamental platform ever since. In its seminars, Jazz Impact brings the two threads of improvisational jazz and innovative business development together.

Success for a business enterprise and for a musical ensemble depends on leadership, as well as on the support of leadership. The support of leadership in the ensemble is not followership. It involves careful listening and flexible, dynamic, active contribution. Leadership, claims Gold, can only exist through this kind of dynamic support, both within the jazz ensemble and within a business organization.

All this involves risk. No creative growth, business or musical, no breakthrough takes place without risk. The musicians risk losing touch with the music and becoming insensitive to the other players in the group. But the greatest risk is not having something new and worthwhile to play. The audience (the customer) and the musicians themselves want innovation. Jazz Impact pulls in the audience to play with these concepts in practical ways. The audience has lots of fun learning how to collaborate and avoid chaos, how to take responsibility for innovation, how to take responsible risks within a shared vision.



Communicating Passion

Ultimately, Jazz Impact aims to communicate not just ideas, but passion: Passion inspires great improvisation and drives business innovation. It happens when we let go of the fear of failure and of error, embrace the possibility of creativity, and enter the moment. No easy feat. But, as Miles Davis once said, "Do not fear mistakes. There are no mistakes in jazz."

Good jazz, like good business, nurtures an environment that honors "mistakes" by trying to work them into the vision, to see where they might fit, and discovering how to make sense of them. Jazz Impact tries to foster a similar environment.

The music is a powerful tool for building such an environment in the seminar. (And the music is good. These are truly world-class musicians.) It gets people loosened up and excited. It builds community, especially the way that Jazz Impact includes the audience in the music itself. The goal is to bring out the audience's

passion: new energy and mindfulness at work, new ways to listen to each other, new creativity, new collaborative skills and a new approach to leadership. The interaction teaches them something about themselves - and, of course, about jazz. Usually, a number of attendees "get" jazz as a musical form for the first time during the seminar, a wonderful side benefit of the work. It also teaches them about each other and the potential for working together in new ways. In short, it teaches businesspeople how to jam.

Leigh Advisor - Fall 2002