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MILES DAVIS IN THE CLASSROOM: USING THE JAZZ ENSEMBLE METAPHOR FOR ENHANCING TEAM LEARNING _____

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Many organizational behavior and human resource management courses incorporate team learning tasks that require high degrees of cooperation and interdependence among students (Lyons, 1991). Although student learning teams are frequently used in such courses, it is not uncommon to observe students struggling with and complaining about the dysfunctional group dynamics that often arise within their teams.

Team learning dysfunction can usually be attributed to the presence of individual or self-oriented role behaviors among team members (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Common examples of self-oriented behaviors that we have observed in courses that use learning teams include members defending their opinions at the expense of listening to other group members, overly talkative members who dominate and control the group, and, at the other extreme, members who are inhibited to express their opinions because of a fear of appearing foolish.

In this article, we will demonstrate the utility of the jazz ensemble metaphor for enhancing team learning. We will first discuss why the jazz ensemble is a useful metaphor for enhancing the learning team members' capacity to engage in dialogue. Next, we introduce an experiential exercise that provides

Authors' Note: The first author was the instructor for the course referred to in the article. Before receiving his doctorate in human science, the second author was a professional jazz saxophone player.

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students an imaginative and aesthetic experience of the behavioral dimensions of team learning among jazz ensemble members in the Miles Davis band. Finally, we conclude by reporting student observations of this exercise, which resulted in a significant shift toward enhancing the capacity of their learning groups to engage in dialogue, along with a concomitant reduction in self-oriented behaviors.

Utility of the Jazz Ensemble Metaphor

Jazz is a collective art form. Being a collective and improvisational art form, jazz groups exhibit a high degree of task interdependence. If any one of the players is not in good form or not up to the material, the whole sound suffers, and everybody sounds bad, no matter how individually brilliant the other players may be. In jazz, the sound forms a gestalt, a whole, that must reflect the cohesion (or lack of it) in the group. Thus, to creatively and harmoniously respond to improvisational changes occurring within the ensemble, jazz musicians have to develop enormous sensitivity to their musical environment. As Senge (1990) points out, jazz ensembles have both "talent and a shared vision (even if they don't discuss it), but what really matters is that the musicians know how to *play* together" (p. 236).

The jazz ensemble is a useful metaphor for team learning in that it is an indigenous American art form that does not suppress individual creativity in the service of group conformity (as, for example, the Japanese team concept tends to do). For example, both in the classroom and corporate world, members of learning teams often equate being a good "team player" with not making waves, avoiding conflict, or conforming to group norms. Especially in the corporate world, insisting that people become team players is often a code term for complying with the desired corporate image.¹ In too many cases, these injunctions stifle individuality and true creativity.

Instead, the jazz ensemble allows for a creative dialectic to exist between the individual and group. It is the uniqueness of the six different instruments in a jazz sextet that gives the ensemble its sound and mood; the absence or suppression of even one instrument would detract from the whole. Jazz critic Nat Hentoff (1984) comments on this creative dialectic between the individual and the group:

The high degree of individuality, together with the mutual respect and cooperation needed in a jazz ensemble, carry with them philosophical implications. It is as if jazz were saying to us that not only is far greater individuality possible to man than he has so far allowed himself, but that such individuality, far from being a threat to a cooperative social structure, can actually enhance society. (p. 18)

Although the jazz ensemble allows individual creativity and self-expression to blossom, it is always oriented toward enhancing the collective musical creation and emerges within the context of the group as a whole. For example, when we listen to a jazz ensemble, we are often struck by the obvious delight of the ensemble members when they each have their own “moment” to express their individual creativity during the piece but then are able to selflessly fade back into the group to support the overall effort. Similarly, team learning is also a collective discipline. As Senge (1990) states, “It is meaningless to say that ‘I’, as an individual, am mastering the discipline of team learning, just as it would be meaningless to say that ‘I am mastering the practice of being a great jazz ensemble’ ” (p. 237). Thus the music of an ensemble, or the learning within a team, is really an emergent property of the system. Within both groups, the quality of the product—whether it is improvised music or new insights—is a collectively determined phenomena that emerges out of the interaction and cannot be credited to any single member.

Playing Together—Thinking Together: The Artistry of Dialogue

Whereas great jazz ensembles know how to *play* together, effective learning teams must know how to *think* together. Jazz ensemble members learn how to play together through participating in a discipline that has its own set of social practices, implicit rules, and musical theory (Bastien & Hostager, 1991). In contrast, lacking a formal discipline for learning how to think together, both students in the classroom and managers in the boardroom have floundered in groups that require high degrees of cooperation, social creativity, and innovation.

According to Senge (1990), “The discipline of team learning involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion, the two distinct ways that teams converse” (p. 236). Elaborating on the notion of dialogue, Bohm (1991) states:

The word *dialogue* has a Greek root, *dia* plus *logos*. Now *logos* means “the word,” but presumably not just the word but the meaning. And *dia* means “through,” not “two.” This suggests that the meaning is passing through or flowing between the participants. . . . the word *discussion* has the same roots as *percussion* and *concussion*. It suggests a Ping-Pong game in which we are passing the ball back and forth between us, and the purpose is to win. (p. 177)

Although most competitive educational and business settings have provided ample opportunities for engaging in heated discussions and debates, forums for practicing dialogue have been virtually nonexistent. Hence it is

not surprising that dialogue is usually haphazard and rare in occurrence in educational and business settings.

As a discipline for learning how to think together in teams, engaging in dialogue requires a facilitating environment and conditions that allow a relational mutuality to develop between and among team members. Relational mutuality manifests when there is an openness to influence, empathy, and a constantly changing pattern of response. Further, dialogue is both a collective and individual discipline. Team members aspiring to engage in a dialogue must be willing and able to suspend their assumptions while simultaneously paying serious attention to habitual thought and emotional reflexes within the group (Bohm, 1991). Dialogue cannot occur until team members are able to treat and view their opinions as assumptions that they hold, rather than as absolutist statements or unquestionable facts about the way things are. This requires a real commitment to active inquiry and a subtle, probing intelligence. Thus, when in dialogue, we are able to collectively activate our intelligence, where the power of questioning allows us to "investigate how human beings turn perceptions into judgements, judgements into patterns, and patterns into fixed positions" (Tulku, 1987, p. xxvii). The process of questioning serves to open up fixed positions and rigid defensive posturings so that the meaning can begin to flow through the group. The artistry of dialogue is being able to gently and skillfully ask the right questions at the right time or to say exactly what needs to be said so as to enhance the participatory intelligence and flow of meaning through the group.

Although dialogue may sound like a serious endeavor worth striving for, it is also a playful activity (Senge, 1990). In fact, Bohm (1991) maintains that dialogue is akin to a "very subtle music . . . a kind of dance with music" (p. 192). Like jazz, each member may have his or her "moment" too; when a provocative statement is made or an honest question is asked at the appropriate time, the thinking process within the group can become more coherent and harmonized.

How the Exercise Works

Before the exercise begins, we introduce students to the relevance and utility of the jazz ensemble metaphor as we have discussed in the prior sections. We inform them that they are going to listen to a 9-minute cut, "Freddie Freeloader," from the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*.

We begin by first asking them to try to identify and imagine that they are one of the musicians in the band (Miles Davis on trumpet, Paul Chambers on bass, James Cobb on drums, Cannonball Adderly on alto saxophone, John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, or Wyn Kelly on piano). Next, we instruct them

that their task while listening to the music is to jot down what types of qualities, skills, attitudes, or conditions are operative and conducive to the creative group and team learning process among ensemble members. These might take the form of action, process verbs, or descriptive adjectives. To minimize our influence and not distract students, we sit with our backs to the class while we play Freddie Freeloader. Because we thoroughly enjoy this particular tune, we don't refrain from tapping our feet and "grooving" with the beat.

After the cut is played, students meet in their respective learning teams. We instruct them to complete the following steps:

Step 1. Students are to share from their list of recorded observations and descriptive qualities of the jazz ensemble experience. This task, as well as the remaining steps, also includes a "metatask": We tell students that they are to try to actualize and enact the qualities they identified as they interact with their team members. In essence, we ask them to try to bring the spirit of the jazz ensemble performance into their own learning teams.

Step 2. Next, students are instructed that their group task is to talk about (notice how we refrain from using either the words *dialogue* or *discussion*) the reading assignment, which, in this case, was a controversial article entitled "Hooked on Work" (Schaeff & Fassel, 1989).

Step 3. After students have completed the task, we ask them to reflect on the group process within their learning teams. We ask them to consider if and how the enactment of the metatask had an influence on their group process.

Step 4. Finally, we reconvene the class into a large circle and ask students to share their observations. We ask them whether they observed or felt any significant differences in the quality of their group interaction while they were conducting the task in comparison to their previous experience in the course. In addition, we ask them to identify barriers or obstacles to dialogue and whether they think their teams were engaged in dialogue or a discussion.

What Students Observed and Reported

We collected the lists of process verb statements associated with students' perceptions of the jazz ensemble performance and tabulated their responses. Table 1 reveals a summary of the process verb statements that were most frequently reported by the 25 students in the course.

TABLE 1
Students' (N = 25) Process Verb Statements Associated
With the Miles Davis Performance of "Freddie Freeloader"

<i>Process Verb Statement</i>	<i>Response Frequency</i>
Free-flowing	(n = 24)
Playful	(n = 23)
Fluid	(n = 21)
Focused	(n = 21)
Attentive listening to each other	(n = 20)
Adventurers, leading, or courageous	(n = 20)
Technically skilled	(n = 19)
Being supportive of the group	(n = 19)
Listening to the whole, not just your piece	(n = 18)
Willing to let go of the lead	(n = 16)
Involved	(n = 15)
Taking risks	(n = 15)
Comfortable with change, uncertainty	(n = 14)

As noted in Table 1, a majority of the students characterized the interactions of ensemble musicians as being free-flowing ($n = 24$), playful ($n = 23$), fluid ($n = 21$) but, at the same time, focused ($n = 21$). The dialectic between fluidity and focus among ensemble musicians in the Miles Davis band underscores the notion that the creative group process itself is the product. A "disciplined spontaneity" seems to describe the qualities associated with the emergent properties of the overall creative product, collective interactions, or "group gestalt" within the ensemble.

Several statements in Table 1 also reveal behaviors associated with empathy or deep listening. Specifically, attentive listening to each other ($n = 20$), being supportive of the group ($n = 19$), and listening to the whole, not just your piece ($n = 18$), indicate that students perceived these behaviors as being instrumental to the ensemble's successful performance. Indeed, establishing empathy has been found to be a very important factor in jazz improvisation and composition (Hodeir, 1962).

Interestingly, two of the process verb statements—adventurous, leading, and courageous ($n = 20$) and willing to let go of the lead ($n = 16$)—can be seen as complementary behaviors that are essential to generating and supporting the free-flowing, playful, and fluid qualities of the creative group process. Thus students perceived that a unique ability of jazz ensemble musicians was that they were able to be both *leaders and followers* as they improvised the "Freddie Freeloader" tune. This flexible role behavior was

evident as students heard each ensemble musician take the lead and then gracefully fade into the background to follow and support another ensemble member's initiative.

Students also described the jazz musicians as being involved ($n = 15$), engaged in taking risks ($n = 15$), and comfortable with change or uncertainty ($n = 14$). The nature of improvisation is such that jazz musicians inherently have to face and respond to unfamiliar songs or unusual variations on familiar ones. It is interesting to note that Barron's (1990) research shows that creative people are actually attracted to novel and unusual situations. The creative response to novel situations, in fact, requires high involvement, taking risks, and a tolerance for ambiguity.

Although the behavioral qualities of musicians and group dynamics of the ensemble were the central focus of the students' descriptive observations, they did not overlook the importance of simply knowing one's instrument—that is, the sheer technical skill it takes to be a good jazz musician. Accordingly, being technically skilled ($n = 19$) can be considered as acquiring a "special level of proficiency" that is a component of personal mastery (Senge, 1990). Indeed, were it not for the musicians' individual knowledge and skills, they would not be able to contribute to the collective creation. Similarly, in any learning team, each member must be well prepared, knowledgeable of the subject matter, or technically skilled in order to contribute and influence the group task.

In reference to their own team learning experience, students unanimously reported that awareness of the metatask produced a "felt shift" (Gendlin, 1978) and significant qualitative difference in the way that they and their team members interacted during the group task. We contend that the presence of the metatask—in this case, enactment of the perceived behavioral qualities operative within the jazz ensemble—induced students to "reflect-in-action" (Schon, 1983) about their behavior as a contribution to the overall group task. The experiential quality of this felt shift was expressed by several students in the following ways:

A timeless feeling seemed to takeover.

The group just flowed.

We were more at ease and patient with each other.

People really seemed to be listening to what I had to say.

Surprisingly, several advanced students remarked that it had been the best group interaction they had experienced since they had been enrolled in the program.²

Clinical Observations of the Instructors

During the group task, we observed that the patterning of physical postures and nonverbal behaviors displayed by students within each of the five learning teams were appreciably different from prior class sessions. Typically, students were usually slouched in their chairs and appeared to be passively listening to other team members as they either doodled or looked down at the floor. However, during this group task, students assumed an attentive posture by leaning physically toward each other and by keeping active eye contact. Although students were more perceptively present with each other as evidenced by their attending behaviors (Egan, 1975), we also noticed that the timing of the transitions between each individual talking within the teams was more smooth and less abrupt than had been so in prior team meetings. There were simply fewer instances of team members interrupting each other in midsentence. In addition, we noticed that the tone of voice, emotional inflections, and verbal pacing—what Egan (1975, p. 62) refers to as “paralinguistic behaviors”—between team members seemed to be harmonious rather than discordant. In sum, it seemed as though students were displaying more patience with and appreciation for each other.

We were particularly impressed by the observed behavioral change of one student. Before participating in this exercise, Stacy had engaged in frequent self-oriented behaviors that were often disruptive to her team’s learning. Although she was undoubtedly an extremely bright and enthusiastic woman, she often acted as the self-appointed leader or spokesperson for her group. Typically, she dominated and controlled her group by speaking frequently, rapidly and loudly, without any awareness of how her behavior was alienating members in her team. In response to prior group tasks, Stacy also acted as though she was fiercely competing with other team members in that she was usually the first (and often the last) person to offer her opinion and ideas. However, during this group task, we were amazed to see how she shifted into a relaxed, attentive posture, nodding her head as she actively listened and responded in a much softer voice to other team members’ comments.

Are We Having a Dialogue Yet?

Although it is debatable whether or not students in learning teams were engaged in a “true” dialogue, it is clear that the quality of their group experience had significantly changed for the better. It is probably unrealistic to claim that this change was irreversible, that is, without practice in dialogue, learning teams will inevitably revert back to discussion as their dominant mode of discourse. At minimum, the jazz ensemble metaphor and experien-

tial exercise of listening to the Miles Davis sextet has served as a powerful reference point in their educational experience.

We should, however, not underestimate the power of introducing new metaphors—such as the jazz ensemble—as methods for inducing cognitive and behavioral changes in management education (Boland, 1989; Morgan, 1986; Srivastva & Barrett, 1988; Weick, 1979). Salner (1988) states that

metaphor is more than a linguistic device. The term itself becomes a metaphor for a cognitive process and a particular way of “seeing” the world around and within us. (p. 1)

Similarly, Lackoff and Johnson (1980) have argued that metaphor is not something limited to “the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish” (p. 3)—here, of course intended in the pejorative or at least in the limited sense of the poetic imagination. They suggest, on the contrary, that metaphor governs our conceptual systems. An excellent example that they use is the conceptual metaphor “argument is war.” This leads to expressions such as “I *demolished* her argument” or “Your claims are *indefensible*,” which reflect not just a turn of phrase, but the fact that a verbal interaction is seen as a battle with winners and losers.

Metaphors can lock us into a certain way of being in the world, but they also have the potential of liberating us as well. What if, as Lackoff and Johnson (1980) suggest, we change our metaphor to “argument is dance”: It is interesting to note that Bohm (1991) likens a real dialogue to “a kind of improvised singing and dancing together” (p. 192). Thus, when we are in dialogue, as within the jazz ensemble, there is no conception of winning or losing. Rather, both mediums of expression—dialogue and jazz—symbolize a mutual exploratory process that is not driven by a predetermined or fixed outcome.

The root of self-oriented behaviors in groups is fear. Fear-based reactions essentially manifest in two ways: A group member reacts by either wanting to fight with or flee from the group (Bion, 1959). Both of these defensive reactions are based on unexamined assumptions or opinions that interfere with team learning and group creativity. If team members are preoccupied with defending their opinions (either consciously or unconsciously), the thinking process between team members is stifled.

Summary

Bringing the jazz ensemble metaphor to life by appreciatively listening to one of the greatest jazz “teams” provides students a concrete example of a group that has learned how to suspend their assumptions, allowing members

to participate in the stream of meaning flowing through the whole group. Based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, by providing such a concrete experience, students are able to reflect on the behavioral qualities of jazz musicians and then enact them within their own learning teams. Clearly, the exercise heightens students' sensitivity as they begin to watch for more subtle cues, monitoring their own responses to other team members and paying more attention to the flow of meaning within their groups. If management—as Drucker (1989) points out—is a liberal art, then management education needs to draw from, and creatively build on, the best of a culture's tradition. Jazz is just such an American invention that management students can learn from.

Notes

1. The admonition to be a "team player" as signifying a covert message of compliance to corporate norms was pointed out by one of our students, Toni Hargis.

2. Students participating in the exercise were working toward a master's degree in organization development and were enrolled in a required business and organizational effectiveness course.

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