All that jazz: how executives can inject improv into their organizations

Trombonist and music teacher Chris Washburne works with executives to show them how jazz techniques can benefit their workplace repertoires.



April 1, 2013

Imagine the artist Matisse being given a blank canvas and being told he had three minutes to create a masterpiece in front of a live audience. Or the filmmaker Federico Fellini being told

©IESE Business School

he had to shoot a movie in five minutes with no crew, no script and no second takes.

Although it sounds incredible, this is essentially what jazz musicians do every time they perform: they improvise.

Business leaders also need to improvise, now more than ever. As technology changes at an ever faster pace, organizations need to come up with ever more inventive solutions, making innovation and flexibility crucial to success.

Large, established industries that have gotten by for years with one type of business model risk getting left behind if they fail to adapt to today's 24/7 business realities. Ironically, the music industry itself stands as the most fitting example of being too slow to adapt.

Yet it is music, and in particular jazz music, that also has the most to teach us regarding the vital skills necessary for success; skills like listening, collaborating, taking risks and, above all, improvisation — the very stock-in-trade of professional jazz musicians.

Chris Washburne — trombonist, composer, band leader and director of the Louis Armstrong Jazz Performance Program at Columbia University in New York City — is one of a growing number of people who believe we can learn a lot from jazz.

In a bid to make this most demanding of art forms more relevant and accessible to our day-to-day lives, Washburne works regularly with executives to show them how elements of jazz can be incorporated into their daily repertoire and used to beneficial effect in the workplace.

Taking the road less traveled

"The best improvisers in the world are 2-year-olds," says Washburne. "They'll take anything and turn it into a toy."

Sadly, as we grow older, our ability to improvise wanes. Too often, at school, little value is placed on music, drama, dance or art — the very subjects that allow young people to explore their innate creativity and spontaneity. As a result, we play it safe.

In Washburne's view, learning how to improvise as an adult is a case of unlearning the standardized way we learned things at school, and tapping into the imaginative, playful, curious toddlers tucked away inside each one of us. After all, we were all 2-year-olds once.

At the 2013 World Economic Forum summit in Davos, Washburne led an open forum on "Life

©IESE Business School

Lessons From Jazz: Improvisation as a Way of Life.” In it, he shared a simple homework assignment that he gives to his students. He asks them to walk home a different way from normal every day for a term, to see what they discover. They might stumble upon a new restaurant or bump into an old friend. Each time it gets harder and harder to find a new route home, but this is exactly the point. In life, even if you’ve done the same thing a thousand times before, your job is to make it seem different or feel fresh each and every time.

One student told him it was the best assignment he’d ever had. On the 16th walk home, he met his future wife.

Tune in to your team

Another exercise Washburne uses with his students is to pass a clap around a circle to see if they can keep a groove. When they find it, when everyone listens and works together, it starts to sound like music.

It’s like a meeting, when all of a sudden someone says something that gets everyone excited, and you run with that idea.

“Once you get to that place where you’re taking it to a higher level, as a leader in that situation, you have to ask yourself, how do you sustain that conversation groove and keep it going for as long as possible?”

The answer, Washburne believes, is to give everyone a safe space to express their ideas, and to encourage teamwork. Surround yourself with a strong team and listen carefully to them. He adheres to the adage: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

“Yes, I can play the trombone,” he says, “but the music is going to sound a heck of a lot better if I’ve got great musicians around me.”

Fluid leadership

Jazz grew out of the end of slavery in the United States during the late 19th century. For newly emancipated African-Americans, it was vital that everyone had a voice.

Watch a band play and you’ll soon realize why jazz has been called the purest form of democracy.

©IESE Business School

Leadership is fluid: One performer may have a solo for a minute or two, but anyone can jump in and change the direction of the music at any time. The tune, or agenda, is just a blueprint that can be altered by anyone.

For the band leader, the job is not to dictate what happens, but to facilitate everyone feeling comfortable enough to take risks and contribute. Leadership is about allowing people the freedom to voice their ideas, and then going with those ideas to see where they take you, even if those ideas seem terrible in the beginning, he says.

This might sound like a recipe for chaos and interminable gatherings, but Washburne insists that most people instinctively understand the idea of "collective improvisation."

"It's not solo improvisation, which makes for very boring music. It's a give and take; a conversation. It's like being at a dinner party: You're sitting around a table, and there's a conversation happening. If someone completely commands that conversation, it might be interesting if they're a wonderful storyteller, but it's not the best demonstration of social graces, and it's considered rude. Everybody should get a chance to contribute. If everybody does, it can be a wonderful event. Grandstanding, where one person just likes to hear the sound of his own voice, is a drag."

The best dinner party hosts, he points out, aren't necessarily the best cooks; they're the best facilitators.

Structures that encourage flow

Translated to a business setting, even something as simple as substituting a rectangular conference table for a round one can help to democratize meetings and ensure that everyone has an equal presence and say.

Another example is Michael Bloomberg. When he first became mayor of New York City in 2002, he broke with decades of tradition by eschewing his own private office. Instead, he planted himself in the middle of an open-plan office space, which was more reminiscent of a Wall Street trading floor or newsroom.

A *New York Times* article described this "bullpen" design as "intended to encourage employees, regardless of rank or stature, to approach him with ideas and questions (and) to cut down on bureaucratic tussling by making it easier for him to deliver instructions to subordinates, who will be sitting just a shout away."

©IESE Business School

Obviously, this idea of fluid leadership requires setting aside one's ego and creating a space where others feel comfortable taking command for a while.

Washburne acknowledges there are moments when, as a leader, "you have to step up and make an executive decision."

However, he insists that being the one in charge is not always about taking the lead but about knowing when to follow or get out of the way.

"Be receptive to the fact that you're no longer in charge of that moment; someone else is. Be okay with that and see how that can actually benefit you and the group of people you're working with," he urges.

Besides adopting more egalitarian seating and office arrangements, flattening out organizational structures can also help. Instead of a hierarchical pyramid, a horizontal leadership matrix — whereby people collaborate in nested circles of self-directed, cross-functional work teams — affords people a greater chance not only of being able to air their ideas but of being heard.

Failure as a learning tool

Admittedly, allowing room for improvisation involves taking a risk, and in doing so, accepting the possibility of failure. For a jazz band, this might mean hitting a bum note. For a company, the stakes are considerably higher, especially in these trying economic times when businesses are especially risk averse.

But central to the process of improvisation is the inevitability of failure, says Washburne. "The important thing is what we do with that failure."

This is perhaps the greatest lesson that jazz can teach us: acknowledging the role that failure can play in the process of innovation.

Different cultures have different relationships with failure. In the United States, failure is an expected part of innovation, so much so that some companies won't even look at investing in a team or new product unless they have experienced some failure beforehand. They recognize that, as painful as failure is, it is also an incredibly effective learning tool.

Traditionally, Europe has had a less tolerant approach to business failure, but that stigma may be changing. In 2012, the European Commission embarked on a plan to modernize E.U.

©IESE Business School

rules governing insolvencies: “Giving honest entrepreneurs a second chance to restart viable businesses and safeguarding employment are key elements of the new European approach to business failure and insolvency,” it stated.

Washburne recalls a talk by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in which she reportedly credited her training as a chemist for helping to shape her leadership approach. A science experiment that failed was a good thing, she said, because now you know one thing that doesn’t work and can move on to the next.

This would seem to echo the popular quote by Thomas Edison, who, when asked by a reporter about the endless difficulties he encountered in trying to invent the lightbulb, remarked, “I have not failed 700 times. I’ve succeeded in proving 700 ways how not to build a lightbulb.”

“If you’re a business that’s interested in innovation, it doesn’t make sense that you would be closed off to allowing your employees to fail,” says Washburne.

The beauty of messiness

The road to invention is littered with failures. There are myriad examples of things that were invented by mistake, from penicillin and the pacemaker to even the humble Post-It note. By allowing employees to fail, we are opening ourselves up to innovation.

Google is a good example. It allows its engineers to dedicate a certain percentage of their time to projects unrelated to regular work. If Google likes what it sees, it goes up on the site; if it proves popular, it stays.

Granted, many ideas might flop. But by offering employees the opportunity to try, there is always the chance that somebody will come up with something that takes off.

The fact is, whenever a group of people come together and engage in a conversation with each other, things will invariably get messy. There are interruptions, misunderstandings, misfires and mistranslations.

While we may not be able to avoid that, what we can control is how we react to such exchanges, says Washburne. We could die of embarrassment and beat ourselves up. Or we could see such moments as serendipitous opportunities to take conversations and relationships to places they have never gone before.

©IESE Business School

“This is the art form of jazz,” says Washburne.

The best musicians are not those who never make mistakes; they are those who riff on those mistakes.

“Without failure, we cannot succeed; we cannot innovate. We all need to improvise every day. If we didn’t, we’d be dead.”



A scene from the Oscar-winning film *Argo,* in which Ben Affleck (right) portrays CIA agent Tony Mendez, who used scotch to improvise a dramatic escape out of revolutionary Iran.

5 jazzy professions: All these occupations have learned to improvise. Are there areas of your work that could do with some jazzing up?

1. Pilots. Pilots train relentlessly to think and act quickly and creatively should the worst transpire. Take Captain “Sully” Sullenberger, hailed as a hero for his split-second decision to land his U.S. Airways flight on the Hudson River after the plane was disabled by a flock of

©IESE Business School

geese shortly after takeoff. All 155 passengers and crew survived.

As he told the media afterwards, “For 42 years, I’ve been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience, education and training. And on January 15, 2009, the balance was sufficient, so that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

2. Athletes. In soccer, tactics matter, but the best teams adapt to whatever is happening on the pitch at the time. Peter Schmeichel, widely revered as Manchester United’s finest ever goalkeeper, surprised everyone in a UEFA Cup match in 1995 by scoring a goal himself in the dying minutes of the game. The unexpected sight of him barreling down the pitch toward the goal was a great distraction for opposing defenders.

In cycling, Lance Armstrong’s reputation may now be in tatters, but few will forget the 2003 Tour de France when onlookers fully expected him to crash when the cyclist in front of him went down. Instead, he swerved, peddled full tilt across a field and then rejoined the race.

3. Emergency services. Firefighters and rescue workers never know what their day will bring, so they have to be able to think on their feet. Whether the job is to rescue people from a house fire, deal with rising floodwater or locate survivors after an earthquake, innovation, quick thinking and teamwork are critical.

During the dramatic rescue of 33 trapped Chilean miners in 2010, engineers were brought in to drill holes before they eventually made it through to the right shaft. The bithead, which was never designed for such work, kept breaking. But with the help of the miners below, who took photos of the broken bits and sent them above ground, the engineers were able to modify the device for the next attempt. The eventual rescue was a credit to the ingenuity of on-the-spot teamwork.

4. Surgeons. You might not like the idea of a doctor freestyling in your frontal lobe, but they improvise every day — and for good reason. Surgeons need to adapt techniques on the fly simply because every human being is so different. No matter if a doctor has done a certain surgery a thousand times before, each time will be different from the last.

For the international medical humanitarian organization, Doctors Without Borders, improvisation comes with the job. Frequently working in countries that have no access to sophisticated equipment, the doctors use everything from papaya paste for dressing wounds, hand drills for relieving brain bleeds and kitchen knives for skin grafts. They prove that improvisation saves lives.

©IESE Business School

5. Special Forces. Would-be Navy Seals or undercover CIA agents might think they should keep quiet about the artistic leanings of their youth, but recruiters for the Special Forces often look for people with artistic backgrounds. They need multifaceted, creative thinkers who see the world in ways that other people don't.

Tony Mendez, the CIA agent made famous by the Oscar-winning film *Argo*, was a master at improvisation. In 1979, the CIA had to come up with a convincing way to get a group of American Embassy workers out of a very hostile Iran. It was Mendez who created the elaborate ruse that they were a film crew scouting locations for a science fiction movie. When forging their documents to get out, his background as a graphic artist came in handy when he used scotch to revive a dried-out ink stamp pad and achieve just the right color and effect. Now that's jazz!

Article written by Natasha Young and originally published in IESE Insight magazine (Issue 17, Q2 2013).

©IESE Business School