

Lead Like Jazz



What my favorite genre of music taught me about leading well.

Jazz. I absolutely love it. I know some don't. Others say it's an "acquired taste," but for me there's nothing like it.

My music journey began in the fifth grade when my parents rented my first clarinet. Through the years my training has included intense study of classical music and countless opportunities to learn and play jazz. While I continue to love both genres and cherish every note I've ever played, it is jazz that has forever captured my heart.

It's not just about the music, either. The older I get, the more I'm seeing the impact that jazz has played on my leadership style. Sounds strange, I know. But the connection between leadership and music makes sense, especially when you begin to understand the difference between classical and jazz. Both genres correlate to distinctive leadership styles.

Here's what I mean. In classical music, someone chooses the song that will be played and hands the musician the sheet music. Every note, crescendo, decrescendo, staccato, and nuance has been written into the music by the composer. The musician's ability to play the music exactly as it has been written is paramount. The only true creativity that is allowed comes from the conductor. The conductor brings a little personality to the performance; yet typically, doesn't stray too far from the intent of the composer.

Jazz is different. When jazz players get together one of the things they love to do is "jam." These sessions typically involve a lot of improvisation and playing by ear. There's no conductor and rarely (if ever) any sheet music. Someone usually calls out the name of a song, someone might ask, "What key?" Before you know it the song is under way. What happens next (in my opinion) is the true beauty of jazz.

The song is moving along when all of a sudden one of the musicians hits an interesting note or plays an unusual rhythm. Everyone hears it and suddenly the bass player picks up on what the drummer just did. The piano player hears it, smiles and changes what he or she was playing and now the sax player is on fire, playing something totally different and unexpected. It is all unscripted but it's important to note: this is not a chaotic free-for-all. The musicians are still playing the song that they started playing earlier. They're just adding some creative nuances to it. This synergy takes everyone to the next level. That's why with jazz, the same song, played by the same people night after night, can sound quite different in any given rehearsal or performance.

So where's the leadership application?

There are times when we as leaders need to take a classical approach. Highly complex projects require careful attention to detail. We need to play every note on the page. I don't want my dentist playing "jazz" in my mouth during a root canal. I want accuracy. I want rules followed. I want exact science applied. Many leaders are process people and have personalities that tend to make them focus on details, accuracy, and good process. But there are certain situations that call for a different approach. There are times when we encounter obstacles and ambiguity, times where a little "jazz" is just what it takes to lead on another level.

Here are a few jazz concepts to help you and your team advance creatively, or at least have some fun. Let's revisit the jam session and see what happens behind the music.

1. Risk: The drummer tried something different (took a risk and felt the freedom to do so). Sometimes our need for order and structure can stifle the creativity of others. If we hope to work together in a way that produces fresh ideas and creative results, our team members need to feel free to improvise.

2. Listening: The bass player heard what the drummer was doing and changed the notes and rhythm. Listening to what's happening around you (what others are saying or how they're reacting) can take you in a new and more creative direction.

3. Collaboration: Because there's no sheet music and no conductor in jazz, the success of the song is dependent on everyone's contribution. Everyone must be actively engaged and doing their part. This results in spontaneous and beautiful teamwork.

4. Awareness: Eye contact and body language are keys to a great jazz performance. Jazz musicians watch each other, smile, nod, and sometimes use hand gestures. Nobody ever taught them these signals, they just picked them up. Why? How else would you create something beautiful without sheet music and a conductor? All you have is each other, so you have to be watching, listening, and observing.

5. Sensitivity: Have you ever wondered how jazz groups bring a song to an end? After all, there's no sheet music or conductor to signal the final note. But they just do. They know when the song is over. They feel it and sense that they've done all they can do, and have enjoyed every moment. No one yells out over the music, "We are going to end the song now!" There's no need. They've been on an experiential journey. They've been literally in tune with each other, and they just intuitively know when it's time to move on to the next song.

Perhaps there's a jazz musician trapped somewhere inside of you. Maybe it's time to release the controls a bit and give it a shot. The flipside is that maybe there are some of you that have been playing a little too much jazz lately and it's time to sit down and create some sheet music (i.e. writing out a plan and sticking to it). Leading with jazz is not always the best answer, but neither is playing only classical. The key is to know when to switch styles in order to match the leadership situation.

Scott Olson is the Founder and CEO of Lead Like Jazz LLC. He's also the President and CEO of a global nonprofit that serves the poor and oppressed around the world. As a professional saxophonist he brings a sense of jazz and creativity to life and leadership. Follow Scott on social media @scottolsonCEO or email him at scott.olson@leadlikejazz.com