



There are certain moments in life for which there is no script. Jazz is like that for me.

The words “classical” and “jazz” have become leadership metaphors for me. If you missed my first Lead Like Jazz article, let me recap some basic ideas.

In classical music, the musicians play the notes that are placed in front of them. They carefully follow the conductor’s direction, and they’re expected to play with precision. Paying careful attention to detail is what defines excellence.

Jazz is different. Contrary to what non-jazz lovers may think, jazz is not a talent-less free-for-all. It just requires a different approach to making music. There’s no conductor and rarely (if ever) any sheet music. Because the musicians are often improvising and “playing by ear,” they need a different set of skills.

I often see other leaders in teams I’ve been on, regardless of whether or not they’ve ever picked up an instrument, as musicians that I may get an opportunity to play with. While most people lean more toward one leadership style than another, the ability to move between styles and remain fluid can be a tremendous asset to any team. Ordinary groups can become extraordinary teams as members help each other move between genres. The classical musicians may need some encouragement to play a little jazz to see a challenging situation from a different perspective, while those who naturally play jazz may need to dial it back sometimes to achieve greater focus and clarity.

In jazz, the “groove” created in the moment determines the outcome (sound, emotion, feeling). In classical style, the composer and conductor have predetermined the outcome. When a leader and team find that “leadership groove,” where they mesh creatively and challenge the sheet music, they can move into an incredible place of synergistic collaboration.

Finding the groove is a beautiful thing in a great musical performance, but it is even more priceless when a group of individuals become a committed team. Intuition enters in as well, it’s fun and it takes your music to another level. When intuition and groove find each other, you start to feel what you’re supposed to be doing in that moment.

You know what song to play.

Leaders need vision. We may not always know how we are going to get there, but we do need to know where “there” is. Someone once said, “A leader’s job is to move people from here to

there.” Andy Stanley described “there” as a “clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction that it should be.” Stephen Covey described “there” as “beginning with the end in mind.” While jazz musicians are able to improvise and make things up on the spot, great band leaders are visionary and strategic, always knowing what song they are playing and what song they’re going to call next.

You know when it’s your time to play.

In music and in leadership, timing is everything. And you can’t have that kind of rhythm without listening.

Knowing when to play is easy if you are attentive to what’s happening around you. Encourage your team to listen, to ask clarifying questions, to listen a bit more, to make sure you’re sensing the groove, to keep pulling the best out of each other, and when you know you’ve got something to offer, to keep laying it out there. Maybe it falls flat, but maybe it’s the game-winning shot.

And because of this dynamic of outward focus, jazz is rarely selfish. Jazz players thrive off of each other; they are patient and rejoice when somebody plays their part well. And as they do, they discover the beauty of synergistic collaboration.

That’ll play in leadership.

You know what notes to play.

Unless your name is John Coltrane and you have earned the right to play any darn note you want, then you have to practice. You need to learn the scales, to learn to play in tune, and when to hit the right notes. In leadership this translates into word choice. Few things irritate me more than an immature extrovert that has a lot to say but hasn’t learned how to communicate it well. Word choice and timing are a powerful combination in the hands of an emerging leader. Whether young or old, we should be committed to helping each other grow as communicators.

Legendary jazz bass player Marcus Miller really gets this whole idea of awareness and synergistic collaboration. I transcribed the following sound bite from a video clip on his website:

You hope that your spirit comes through your music and it resonates with people who are listening to the music (especially when you’re doing a lot of improvisation). You don’t even know what you’re going to play, so you’re just counting on your spirit. You’re counting on your ability to feel the audience, to feel your band members, and to feel the whole environment and make it come through your instrument. You’re counting on the fact that you can translate all this information into something that makes people feel good.

Did you catch it? Can you sense the importance of watching, waiting, and listening for the groove? It’s like a surfer catching the perfect wave.

Can you see the tremendous potential that exists when jazz leadership smacks up against the daily grind of your leadership journey? Leading like jazz opens new doors for leaders. There are certain moments in life for which there is no script. Our formal training and preparation can take us far, but sometimes not far enough. Sometimes we just need that extra “something.” The ability to apply jazz leadership from time to time can be an incredible addition to you and the people

you work with. You can't play the right notes (or make the right strategic moves) unless you're listening to what's going on around you. Healthy teams and dynamic organizations need people who can play classical and jazz.

Your openness to trying a little jazz may help you and your team discover a leadership groove that changes everything.

Here's a creative checklist to get you leading like jazz:

- Download (and listen to) the "John Coltrane: Ballads" album.
- Get a new pair of sunglasses (way cooler than the kind you would normally buy).
- Buy a kazoo (if you're under 40, Google it).
- Find a quiet place, grab your kazoo, close your eyes (but still wear the sunglasses), put your headphones on, and play along with Coltrane—and hope there's nobody in the room when you open your eyes.
- Finally (and seriously), give it a go: show up at your next meeting and try playing a little jazz with your team. See if you can move them from a group of individuals to a dynamic team who just got their first taste of synergistic collaboration.

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