

Here's What Jazz Music Teaches Us About Leadership



Leaders who communicate with a situational understanding, learn to embrace chaos empower their others to lead can make beautiful music.

Justin Joffe, Editor-in-chief, Ragan.com

Colleagues occasionally refer to a harmoniously executed collaboration as “making beautiful music together,” but rarely does the metaphor extend to leadership. That’s why speaker, bassist and leadership coach Michael Gold, PhD, founded Jazz Impact, through which he delivers music-based learning

programs focused on building collaborative skills that are essential for innovative organizations.

Gold recently opened a Jazz Impact session for Ragan by explaining that the link between jazz and leadership starts with clarifying what leadership actually means. Gold says that most organizations consider leadership to be static- part of a single individual's job description. But true leadership is (and actually always has been) a distributed action that emerges where and when it is needed, especially in conditions of uncertainty.

Just as a jazz ensemble knows how to evolve a tune to meet the needs of the moment, Gold says that leaders must be ready to listen and improvise on the fly. Here are some of his tips for those hoping to get in the groove of improvisational leadership.

1. Maintain a situational understanding of your ensemble

Gold says that leaders are too often expected to automatically straighten out chaotic change in the moment with a unilateral procedure or solution. Of course, jazz doesn't work that way – a bandleader understands when a certain situation should be toned down to meet the needs of the audience or the room, and when the music should be amplified more. For Duke Ellington, the biggest challenge each night was adjusting to the different spaces they were performing in.

“When it comes down to the actual playing in the moment, everybody shares an equal responsibility for having a very broad situational understanding of what's going on in the big picture, how their specific role plays into that, what their limitations are, **and** what the limitations of that role may be because of what the instrument itself is capable of doing,” Gold says. “And how they can either pull back if they have to, or how they can stretch beyond what they're normally used to doing.”

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