



Dr. JB Dyas (left) presents a Jazz Informance at the U.S. Dept. of Education with trumpeter Sean Jones and the National Peer-to-Peer Jazz Sextet.

Jazz: A Way to Run Your Business, a Way to Lead a Successful Life

As a jazz musician and educator for the past several decades, I've come to realize that the jazz paradigm, that is, the tenets jazz musicians follow, makes not only for creative music making, but also for success in all aspects of life. Businesses from local mom-and-pops to Fortune 500 companies that have adopted the jazz philosophy in their practices and organizational structure have seen substantial increases in company morale, productivity and profits. And husbands, wives, significant others, children and extended family members who have come to live by the jazz mantra have found more peace, love, harmony and happiness in their lives.

The good news is that you don't need to be a jazz musician, or even an aficionado, to reap the rewards that living a life guided by the jazz paradigm brings. You just need to know a little bit about what jazz is, how it works and what jazz musicians do when creating this music that moves the soul. In a nutshell, jazz is freedom within a framework. Here's how it works.

Think of jazz like any other language: English, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Japanese or dozens of others spoken around the world. Just like a spoken language, jazz communicates thoughts and feelings. But rather than use words to convey how they're feeling, jazz musicians use music to do the same. Just as in regular spoken conversation in which the conversers are saying what they're thinking and feeling in real time depending on what others in the conversation are saying, jazz musi-

cians are playing what they're thinking and feeling in real time depending on what their bandmates are playing. That's right: The overwhelming majority of what you hear in a jazz performance is improvised in the moment. It is not composed ahead of time, just as regular conversation is not a prepared speech. Improvisation is an essential element of jazz.

Because there's no need for spoken words, jazz is widely considered the universal language. Jazz musicians of all ethnicities, religions, backgrounds, cultures, races, personalities, socioeconomic groups, ages and genders — irrespective of their particular spoken languages — can "speak" it. It's not unusual to see a jazz ensemble comprising musicians of multiple generations from multiple countries, races and cultures all coming together for one common purpose: to make great music. If you can swing, regardless of anything else, we want you in the band.

With the exception of avant-garde or free-jazz, most jazz tunes are accompanied by a set of chords that provides support beneath the melody. This chord progression becomes the framework — called a "chorus" in jazz lingo — within which the jazz musicians improvise their own melodies spontaneously. A "chorus" is one time through a song's entire chord progression. When jazz musicians perform a song, they play numerous choruses. The reason it doesn't get boring — even though it's the same chord progression played over and over — is because something new and different

happens during each subsequent chorus. The audience doesn't know what's coming next for the very reason that the musicians themselves don't know what's coming next. It all materializes spontaneously and organically. The musicians and the audience are on a shared pathway of discovery. And if the musicians have done their homework — that is, know how to play their instruments, are creative and adhere to the jazz paradigm — it's a beautiful thing, uplifting all those within earshot.

So, just what is the jazz paradigm? What are its tenets, and how do they translate into leadership, behavior and organizational structures that drive success for all who apply them? First and foremost, jazz musicians really listen to one another. We cannot function unless we are actively and intensely listening to everyone on the bandstand. The bassist doesn't know what to play without ardently listening to the drummer and pianist, and vice versa. And the rhythm section (piano, bass and drums) has to listen to the horn players — who also have to carefully listen to each other — and vice versa, or everything falls apart and no meaningful music is made, just noise. Equally important, we support one another continuously throughout the performance, even if we don't see eye to eye, finding common ground all the while. We desperately want all our bandmates to succeed, otherwise we don't succeed. Wouldn't it be great if Congress were made up of jazz musicians?

Jazz musicians also take turns leading,

even when there's a designated leader. For instance, trumpeter Miles Davis was the unequivocal leader of the Miles Davis Quintet. However, at any given moment, the saxophonist might lead the way, or the pianist, bassist or drummer, or perhaps the rhythm section collectively. In every jazz performance, leadership changes hands seamlessly and organ-

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ically, with every band member going along willfully and joyously with the leader of the moment. Each player feels empowered and takes ownership, being inspired by and in turn inspiring all bandmates.

Miles insisted that his "employees" led him as much as he led them, and the results were extraordinary. Businesses that follow the "Miles Davis paragon" find that they, too, are able to build stronger partnerships and coalitions among executives and personnel. Everyone feeling more empowered and appreciated leads to innovation, increased productivity and more profits.

Another superlative leadership quality that jazz musicians possess is the ability to overcome problematic working conditions. We do it all the time. When we arrive at the gig and the stage is too small, the piano is out of tune, the acoustics are bad, the drummer doesn't show up — we still have a killin' set, possibly a better set than if the drummer had shown up. If a string breaks in the middle of my bass solo, I sally forth, discovering new and perhaps even better things to play. Perseverance is everything.

During the pandemic lockdown, when jazz clubs, concert halls, jazz festivals, schools and recording studios were shut down, I found that nearly all the jazz musicians I know not only survived, but thrived. They built makeshift recording studios in their homes, streamed live pay-per-view concerts online from their living rooms, learned the technology necessary to remotely play and record with others around the world, taught music classes and private lessons via Zoom, completed the jazz education method books and videos they'd been putting off.

I, personally, taught music classes online for over a dozen performing arts high schools

around the country. I found the jazz students to be particularly resilient, dealing with the lockdown far better than the general high school population as reported by the media. Instead of mental health and learning loss issues, these students leaned into their jazz studies. Since they could get all their academic school work completed each day in just three

hours online and no longer had a daily commute, they had more time to work on their instrumental technique, listen to seminal jazz recordings and transcribe the iconic solos on those recordings to inform their own unique voices. And since they were not able to play live with their classmates during this time, they pivoted, efficiently practicing along with recorded backing tracks from sources like jazzbooks.com in which the rhythm sections are composed of some of today's most professional and swinging jazz artists.

All this resulted in exponential musical growth, culminating in their receiving scholarships to attend the nation's top conservatories and university schools of music, including the likes of Juilliard, Berklee, Manhattan School of Music and New England Conservatory. At these institutions, a bachelor's degree costs over a quarter million dollars, a sum none of these students could have afforded. Their ability to be persistent and overcome one of the most significant problematic working conditions in modern history, the lockdown, actually helped them achieve more than they likely would have otherwise. Businesses that followed this same paradigm, pivoting creatively during the lockdown, also prospered. Those that didn't are gone.

Student or professional, jazz musicians also consistently recognize the contributions of others, another predominant leadership quality. We're always talking about how great somebody else plays. And if someone on the gig plays something truly inspired or swings extra hard, we let them know. Enlightened business executives, too, have come to know that overtly recognizing the contributions of their employees contributes immeasurably to their confidence, spirit and productivity. And enlightened spouses and partners who live by

this tenet have found more peace, love and harmony in their relationships.

Most importantly, jazz musicians totally grasp the concept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that the achievement of the goal is more important than anything else. In jazz, the goal is to make meaningful music, and humility is key to its success. Jazz musicians completely understand that we can't do this alone. And we fully realize that others can have great ideas, too, and we must provide everyone on the bandstand with opportunities to contribute those ideas, however contrasting they may be to our own.

Last but not least, it goes without saying that jazz musicians know how to improvise; it's our main thing. Being able to improvise, whether it be in music, business or anywhere else, is a huge plus, especially when things don't go according to plan. Herbie Hancock tells the story of how once, when he was playing with the Miles Davis Quintet in the 1960s, he spaced out for a second and, while Miles was soloing, he played not only the wrong chord, but the "worst chord possible." Miles immediately changed his note and made it fit beautifully — better than if Herbie had played the "right" chord. It's not surprising that so many of the most successful business people in history — Sam Walton, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Oprah Winfrey, Richard Branson, Mark Cuban — have had the ability to think on their feet and turn lemons into lemonade.

Jazz is America's indigenous art form. Today, of course, the music is performed and listened to by people of all ethnicities all over the globe. Indeed, jazz is widely considered America's greatest artistic gift to the rest of the world. It represents our most deeply held American values: teamwork, unity with ethnic diversity, the correlation of hard work and goal accomplishment, persistence and perseverance, and the vital importance of really listening to one another.

There's no better example of democracy in action than a jazz ensemble performance: individual freedom but with responsibility to the group. Jazz personifies our ability to communicate with one another respectfully, regardless of race, gender, language or cultural background. Who would have thought 100 years ago that the original pioneers of this music — Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver — would be creating a bridge between people of all nations and an enlightened approach to run your business and live your life? **DB**

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