

## Insights and Inspiration from the World of Jazz

*Music to Your Ears or Just Plain Noise? It Depends on Who's Playing.*

by Rhea Blanken, Results Technology, Bethesda MD

Today's professional association staff is pressed to both manage and lead in new ways very distinct from times past. The demand to learn faster and modify plans on the fly, together with having to think into the future beyond the status quo, while simultaneously delivering today's value promises is creating more than mere challenges.

Here's the good news. There are daily opportunities to accumulate the knowledge necessary to perform in the present while playing into the future. Association staffers are perfectly placed to translate leadership and management insights from the many perspectives and endeavors they represent, and transfer those distinctions into organizational values and actions.

Last month, the similarities between sports and associations were highlighted by asking "Who is on the field playing the game and who is in the stands watching - it matters who is where doing what!" This month, it's the expressive world of jazz that offers examples of collaboration, improvisation, focus and much more.

But how is jazz similar to associations? The comparisons are many. Learning their lessons and becoming a world-class jazz band, ensemble, quartet or solo artist is more than possible. It takes commitment of focus and discipline. And yes, the way to Carnegie Hall is still the same—practice, practice, practice!

**What is Jazz** - It's a musical conversation held in the present, by individuals, often in collaboration with others. Within the fifty plus jazz styles recorded, one hears and feels the critical connectivity of rhythm, harmony, melody and tones that have been built from past experiences—an inclusive blending of diverse traditions and perspectives.

Jazz allows for individuality and demands collaborative freedom to invent new ways to perform while honoring past excellence. It's governed by individual improvisation and imagination with the collective responses of the group providing direction for "where to take" the music. And just like associations—jazz was made in America!

**Metaphors**—each is translatable and transferable to enhance and advance volunteer leader and staff relationships, activities and communications:

1. *Schedule Jam Sessions*—on a regular basis create opportunities for collaborative improvisation where ideas flow and participants are encouraged to think beyond the current mindset. These are not free-for-all sessions, it's not anarchy – there are rules. Increased technical skill, situational dexterity and endurance come with practice. The courage and confidence to successfully innovate comes after lots of collaboration. Once a year in a strategic planning session is not nearly enough. What rules do the BOD and staff have for thinking and acting outside the box and beyond the status quo? What agreements allow for jam sessions to be productive?



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2. *Develop into a Prolific Arranger*—become practiced and proficient at orchestrating or re-arranging an existing "composition" with the goal of extending its original value, making it more expressive of your group's future. Fine-tuning your organization's performance goes beyond finding a *bona fide original* to copy. Intentionally seek out other organizations' successes and failures and learn from them. Where are you looking for inspiration? What are you looking for?

3. *Plan for Spontaneous Improvisation and Continuous Improvement*—learning as you go and building on what has been experienced. Dizzy Gillespie's "upswept" horn was created when a dancer accidentally kicked his instrument off the stage and bent it. The resulting twisted instrument became a new model for brilliance and individuality once Dizzy realized the unique sound it produced AND recognized his skill at modulating it. What mistakes has your organization made with no lessons learned and no resulting "value modification"? What processes are in place to intentionally disrupt the status quo even as you use it to deliver the current level of value and service?

4. *Arrange for Both Repetitive and Innovative Performances*—individuals sometimes provide background support and sometimes they are meant to fly free. Andre Previn said the "way jazz is performed is always more important than what is being played." How does your organization encourage and reward both repetitive and innovative performances by staff, provide secure environments for them to experiment, enable to go beyond the support and serve model?

Jazz, when it's working, when the magic is right, is the confluence of craftsmanship, innovation, self-expression, trust and confidence. It surrounds one on outside and reaches inside; creating aliveness that expands beyond the musicians playing. It reaches into the listening of the audience and transcends expectations. Create that environment within your organization. It takes effort but just like great jazz—it comes from a desire to play your very best.

***"A problem is a chance for you to do your best."* —Duke Ellington**

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