



**What is leadership?** Like love, leadership is very difficult to define. That, however, has not stopped the “experts” from trying to pin it down. In hundreds of books, they have sought secrets of effective leadership in everyone from presidents to holy men, from Machiavelli to monarchs. Where haven’t the experts looked for lessons on leadership? They haven’t looked at the jazz masters.

At first glance, jazz may seem a very unlikely place to seek lessons on leadership. But often, the freshest ideas come from the place where you least think to look. Consider, for example, the surprising discovery of penicillin in fungus, of all places.

Jazz may not be an obvious source of inspiration for leaders, but leadership at its best is like jazz. Both are ephemeral, elusive, changeable, and adaptive. They are both something that results from a combination of experience, passion, and creativity. Leadership is something you invent, something you create, and re-create, like a nightly jazz improvisation, fresh every time. Both leadership and jazz are fluid, creative, innovative, responsive, improvisational art forms.

It is from personal experience as a leader, with training at the Wharton School and a stint at Procter & Gamble, and from my experience as a jazz producer, writer, and musician that I developed these ideas on leadership and jazz. This idea led me to the public-speaking circuit, where I speak on *Leadership Lessons from the Jazz Masters* to leaders and leaders-in-training in business, health care, education, and trade and professional associations. What follows is a very condensed version of the seven leadership lessons I normally speak about.

Whether you lead musicians or doctors or marketing reps, being a successful leader is a fluid experience—

shaped and influenced by a host of factors. The whole phenomenon of leadership dwells in the rich medium of creativity and innovation, as does jazz.

Leading a jazz band and leading within a hospital, university, or corporation share several important factors. All these organizations are complex adaptive systems. Within such organizations, each unit operates with a *mixture* of autonomy and “group-ness.” A leader’s challenge is to get all the “moving parts” working together while respecting individual and group differences and without imposing uniformity on everyone. And in each type of organizations, you have to expect the unexpected.

There are a number of great jazz masters of the past century whose lives, music, and personal and management styles are packed with lessons for today’s business leaders. These individuals were masters of leadership, creativity, innovation, and change. They worked out new ways to lead, fresh ways to innovate, and inventive ways to address old challenges. In so doing, they emerged—head and shoulders above their peers—as legendary masters of their medium.

These masters include Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Herbie Hancock, Tony Bennett, Tito Puente, and Quincy Jones.

## What leadership lessons can we garner from such jazz masters as these?

There are a great many. But I've distilled them down to seven core lessons for today's organizational leaders.

### 1 LISTEN CLOSELY

When there is no exact “script”—as there is often no score in jazz—you have to listen closely to know: when to modulate to another key, when to change tempo, when to lay back so another player can solo, when to trade phrases, and when to end the piece.

Sometimes you'll see jazz musicians performing in complete sync, changing tempos, ending the piece together—with no visible cues among them. Are they communicating by telepathy? No, they're actually listening *very* closely to one another.

How does a jazz master listen? He or she listens keenly, listens for direction, listens responsively, and listens with generosity. What do I mean by “listens with generosity?” I mean that Duke Ellington wasn't listening for the shortcomings of his players, for the inevitable mistakes. No, he was listening for the beauty in Johnny Hodges' sax playing, for the brilliance in Cootie Williams' trumpet solos, for the ingenuity of Ray Nance's violin solos. And by listening for their greatness, maestro Ellington was inspiring his players to fulfill his lofty expectations of them.

As in jazz, there's often no word-for-word script in businesses, hospitals, and other organizations. If you *have* no exact script, you have to listen closely so you can:

- Show respect
- Anticipate the next move within your group
- Get feedback from your employees
- Get direction from *your* leader.

If you're the leader, listening closely is even more important. Because you set the example for everyone you lead. Because you want feedback on how you're doing as a leader.

Whether you are listening upwards, listening downwards, or listening sideways in the organization, you listen closely so you can *move as one*.

### 2 FIND YOUR OWN SOUND

In today's competitive environment, how do you, as a leader, pull ahead of the pack? One of the important ways is to differentiate yourself from the competition, to stand out from the undifferentiated grays of the pack and, in living color, show your—or your organization's—uniqueness.

Louis Armstrong knew this secret instinctively: he pulled to the head of the pack by finding his own sound, as both trumpeter and singer. So much so that a public-opinion poll some years back found that *the* most recognizable voice belonged not to Humphrey Bogart or John Kennedy or Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley or Walter Cronkite—it belonged to Satchmo. And Armstrong developed a trumpet sound that was just as unique as his singing voice.

By the time he was 30, Duke Ellington had developed a unique composing voice and style—built around the distinctive gifts of each individual band member. He himself was highly individualistic—in his use of language, in his clothing, in the music he wrote, in his overall style. He was so unique, so one of a kind, that I like to say that, after God created Duke Ellington, he tossed the cookie-cutter onto the ground, and stomped it into smithereens. There will *never* be another Duke Ellington.

The examples of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington—not to mention Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and so many other jazz masters—teach us that you have to be authentically yourself, to find what's right for you. That to become a true leader means leading from your own place of uniqueness. Trying to be what others want you to be will lead ultimately to failure. You have to find what you do best, and find what is best about *you*. And lead from that place of strength.

As a leader, you have to develop your own sound, your own style. What worked for Machiavelli or Lincoln or Iacocca might not be right for you. Being a true leader means finding the style of leadership that's right for *you*. When you're comfortable with yourself—inside your

own skin—you'll find others are comfortable having you as their leader. If you don't believe in yourself as a leader, no one else will. Finding your own sound is about finding the style of leadership that resonates with you. It needs to be authentic.

### **3 TAKE RISKS - IMPROVISE**

What makes great jazz begins with improvising. For jazz musicians, improvisation is the heart and soul of their art. The great masters of jazz are capable of creating, on the spot, solos of such originality and brilliance that they are talked about and listened to for decades.

When you don't have a script or score to follow, when you're making it up as you go, when you are improvising a jazz solo, there are a lot of risks. On the bandstand, festival stage, or concert stage, jazz musicians do a nightly high-wire act, without a safety net, every night, at the speed of execution. There is considerable possibility of error or mediocrity. After all, even the most brilliant of us cannot *always* be brilliant. A jazz player:

- Risks making mistakes
- Risks playing a mediocre solo
- Risks disappointing colleagues and fans/customers and
- Risks disappointing himself/herself.

In a big organization, the art of improvisation—giving it all you've got, being brave enough to reveal your soul, risking the nakedness of not knowing what the next note will be until you play it—may seem to have no place.

But if you think about it, we are *all* improvisers. Are your daily conversations scripted? No—you are making them up as you go, you are improvising. If an employee comes to you with a new issue, or you face a brand-new problem, can you take a script off your bookshelf to guide you? No, you have to improvise.

Once we recognize that we are all improvisers as conversationalists, managers, and leaders, that can open our attitudes towards improvisation and spontaneity. Blocking improvisation can choke off creativity. Improvising—or making room for it—can stimulate creativity. And can help engender spirit and “soul” in an organization.

Whether in business or any other organization, improvising requires bravery. You have to be willing to take a risk, to make a mistake in front of other people.

And it requires trust. Trust in yourself. Trust in your colleagues. Trust in your employees. And trust in your audience, your customers.

### **4 REMAIN FRESH - INNOVATE**

The very art of jazz is about making something old and familiar into something *new and fresh*. And isn't that what innovation is? Recombining existing elements into a novel idea, into something original. Like a jazz master, the leader improvises based on years of experience, and recombines aspects of what he or she knows for a new outcome.

The entire history of jazz is comprised of people who innovated, and if we look at master jazz innovators such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, *et al*, certain common traits emerge.

- These innovators were curious about exploring new avenues.
- They were motivated to try out new ideas.
- They wanted to be different—or simply had to be different—to differentiate themselves from the next musician.
- They had a commitment to excellence.
- They were brave and willing to take risks on the bandstand night after night after night.
- They didn't let their formal educations diminish down the natural creativity that we all start with as children.
- They weren't self-censuring. If they had inner voices that said, “No, you shouldn't try that idea—you could fail—you could embarrass yourself in public,” they didn't listen to those voices.
- They were playful.
- And they heeded the call of finding their own way.

In organizations, more than ever before, to stay competitive, you need innovation—new ways of doing things, and the masters of jazz embody important lessons. Can you take inspiration from Armstrong's example? Or from the other great masters of jazz, a music that thrives on innovation?

## 5 JAM

Jam sessions are the stuff of legend in jazz. They typically take place after-hours, when the musicians play primarily for each other, not the public. Players exchange ideas, hone skills, and test themselves against other talents.

You could see a jam session as an effort to break down hierarchy. In a jam session, rank doesn't matter. What matters is your ability, your willingness to take a risk, your spirit of both camaraderie *and* good-natured competition, and your wits in the heat of the moment.

TYPICAL ENGAGEMENT	JAM SESSION
Hierarchical: with a leader	Non-hierarchical: leaderless
Governance could be autocratic	Democratic, communal, consensual
For pay	For play, professional growth
Everyday group of colleagues	New combinations
For customers	For participants
Very structured "agenda"	Free-wheeling: no advance "agenda"
Predictable length	Flexible length
Results can be predictable	Results never predictable, often exciting
Can be routine	Very likely to be fresh

A jam session breaks down barriers between players from various bands, of different styles, of different eras, and of different races. The jam session addresses a problem: How do you learn from other talented professionals that you don't ordinarily get an opportunity to work with?

Do you think any of the principles of a jam session could be applied in your organization? What if you organized a jam session?

MUSIC JAM SESSION	ORGANIZATIONAL JAM SESSION
Product is music	Product is discourse
Problem is creating music that's fresh and new	Problem is creating ideas that are fresh and new

Most professionals are familiar with brainstorming sessions, because we've participated in them. But a jam session goes beyond brainstorming, because in a jam you have no leader, no set length, and most important of all, you jam with people you don't ordinarily work with.

What if you organized a jam session among people from *different* departments? Or from different organizations? What fresh, new ideas just might result?

## 6 COLLABORATE CREATIVELY

So far, we've looked at leadership primarily as a solo art, by looking at individuals. But a critical aspect of effective leadership involves working collaboratively. Jazz masters know how to do this. They know instinctively that "None of us is as smart as *all* of us."

Duke Ellington led one of the great collaborative organizations. In the early years, some of Ellington's pieces, by his own declaration, were created communally. He wrote that some of his numbers were composed "almost by unanimous inspiration while the orchestra was gathered together for a practice session. New ideas are merged at each meeting, and each man contributes to the offerings of the other. The name 'Duke Ellington' is synonymous with 'The Duke Ellington Orchestra.'" Many a time Ellington would hear Johnny Hodges or one of his other players toss off a phrase, and the maestro would fashion an entire composition around those few bars.

This kind of collaboration worked in part because everyone in the band was pushing towards the same goalpost—creating fresh new music—and because, by and large, they weren't fighting over credit and recompense. They were working for the combined good and mutual benefit of the organization as a whole.

## 7 FIND AND NURTURE GREAT TALENT

Let's look at two familiar jazz names with two very different styles of leadership when it came to nurturing talent—Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington.

A perfectionist and strict taskmaster, Goodman demanded a high level of musicianship from his players and became famous for his glare, dubbed “the ray.” Woe to any player who sparked his ire, for he would become the victim of that infamous glare. Goodman’s band suffered legendary turnover, and singer Helen Forrest said she left the band “to avoid a nervous breakdown.”

Duke Ellington was a bandleader of a very different order. He led the greatest jazz orchestra in history. He treated each musician as if he or she were very special—a jewel—important to the whole team, and the results were spectacular. He inspired them to perform at, or beyond, their best, and engendered great loyalty and longevity from his players.

BENNY GOODMAN	DUKE ELLINGTON
A strict disciplinarian	Relaxed, tolerant attitude
Demanded high musicianship	Inspired high musicianship
Ruled by fear	Ruled by inspiration
Monopolized most solos	Gave away most solo space
Suffered legendary turnover	Enjoyed legendary longevity
Kept band for 15 years	Kept band for 50 years

Which kind of leader would you rather work for?  
Which kind of leader would you rather *be*?

Ellington created and led a classic example of what is known in the business world as a “great group.” As Warren Bennis described a “great group,” it’s one in which “the leader finds greatness in the group, and he or she helps the members find it in themselves.” In Ellington’s case, the inspiration worked both ways—he inspired his players, and they inspired him.

One of Duke Ellington’s artistic masterstrokes was his keen insight into the true value of diversity. Ellington understood that difference is not only good and valuable, but almost sacred. He actively sought out difference in the musicians he hired, affirmed cultivated it, and celebrated it.

He composed not for the instrument, but for the man *behind* the instrument. He composed not for alto saxophone, but for Johnny Hodges. Not for first or second or third trumpet, but for Cootie Williams or Shorty Baker or Ray Nance. He treated each player not as some cog in a machine, not as some interchangeable or replaceable part, but rather as a unique talent with individual gifts. Ellington composed pieces designed to tap the different genius in each of his players. When he’d hire a new player, he’d quickly learn that player’s strengths and work to bring out his very best. Ellington’s message has significance for leaders of every stripe, from business to government, from education to medicine.

Imagine what a different world we’d have if all our business, political, organizational and health-care leaders recognized what Duke Ellington knew: that each one of us has been given different gifts. And that we all need to find a way to highlight each person’s gifts, downplay their weaknesses, enhance their strengths, and bring out their very best. That’s a powerful leadership lesson from jazz master Duke Ellington.

And these lessons are a sampling of the  
**Leadership Lessons from the Jazz Masters.**



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