

A Jazz Metaphor for Business Creativity

by Carol McCormick

Metaphor is an important creativity tool. Metaphor is more appealing than pure rhetoric because it stimulates the imagination and appeals to the emotions. A metaphor can transform an intangible idea into an image that people can more easily grasp.

Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity by John Kao, Harper Business, 1996, uses a jazz metaphor to explain a successful model for managing creativity. Kao has taught the creativity courses at Harvard Business School in the M.B.A. and Advanced Management programs for the past fourteen years. He is also academic director of the Managing Innovation executive program at Stanford University.

Management, says Kao, is a performing art. Managers need "a bit of the ham in them" to craft effective challenges. He cites a Sony story to illustrate this: One day a senior Sony executive paid a visit to his engineering department. Like a fairy-tale king visiting his alchemists, he produced a small rectangular block of wood and dared the engineers to design a tape player "no bigger than this." The techies went to work. They soon came up against a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. They could not devise a speaker that would fit into such a tiny package. Then one of them had an inspiration. He asked himself, "Why does it need a speaker at all? Let's do the job with small earphones!" Whereupon the Walkman was born.

The manager in this story led by challenge. He set the stage for this innovation by theatrically "presenting the unthinkable" (a tape player you could carry in the palm of your hand) using the block of wood as a vivid prop.

At its heart, jamming is about improvisation. There's a widely held suspicion that jazz is licentious — freedom run amok. This is untrue. Jazz musicians work within a structure. They agree on who is to play when, on a loose conception of key, and on a stable beat to determine a solo's rhythmic shape. Jazz, like business, implies a series of balancing acts. It must always be disciplined, but never driven, by sheet music.

In today's global marketplace there's no time for business managers to look for solutions in the archives of corporate sheet music. Our highly competitive business

world puts a premium on the skill of improvisation. "All the world's a jazz club. This is an era, in short, that calls for the inspiration of art....The creative role of the manager is to work the central paradox, or tension, of the jam session: to locate the ever-mobile sweet spot somewhere between systems and analysis on the one hand and the free-flowing creativity of the individual on the other," writes Kao.

Companies should live, breathe creativity

Creativity is not a dictum that you can deliver from on high, although that's where it starts. Creativity must become part of a company's personality, the cornerstone of its modus operandi. It's useless and hypocritical to spout a lot of talk about creativity and then retain processes that deaden imagination and spirit. "You must show people, in concrete ways," says Kao, "that your company values their ingenuity, their inventiveness, their spark, and their soul."

Oticon, a hearing-aid maker in Hellerup, Denmark, is an example of corporate jamming. CEO Lars Kolind repeatedly stresses, "Think the unthinkable." One way Kolind reinforces this value is the huge transparent plastic pipe running from floor to ceiling in the middle of Oticon's cafeteria. During the course of the day a snowfall of paper drifts down the tube. At Oticon only one person handles each piece of paper, entering its useful information into a database, shredding the paper, and sending it down the tube. This tube is a vivid reminder to everyone that Oticon is striving to become a rapid-response paperless office. This aversion to paper encourages people to talk to one another and bounce ideas around.

Oticon's headquarters is in an old brewery (fermentation being a symbol for creativity). Connecting the floors is a spiral staircase wide enough for people to stop and talk during chance encounters. Each floor has a coffee bar for schmoozing. "Offices" are credenzas on wheels that can be moved wherever you want to be, wherever your work takes you.

If you want to be a great company that lives and breathes creativity, producing great products and services year in and year out, you need to be a jazzy, happening company. When you walk into such a company you might think, "These people are having too much fun." Don't be fooled. These people are working very hard. But they're having a great time because their creative juices are flowing, and their work

has meaning. That charged and playful atmosphere doesn't simply materialize. Savvy managers send a constant, consistent message that they value creativity and they devise an environment that ignites everyone's enthusiasm. So creativity becomes a process, not an event.

At 3M creativity is a process stimulated by managers. 3M aims to have products no more than five years old earn at least 25 percent of its annual profits. To stimulate continuous innovation, 3M managers regularly organize internal trade shows where different departments share one another's brainstorming and inspirations. The result of the cross-pollination of ideas is a perpetual state of challenge — a vigorous spirit of creative competition.

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