Tuning up your leadership skills

Pioneering jazz orchestra leader Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington

From Duke Ellington to Miles Davis, Art Blakey to Wayne Shorter, does jazz really offer lessons for today's leaders? Des Dearlove talks to **Deniz Ucbasaran** and **Andy Lockett**

ANALYSIS

Since management guru Peter Drucker compared the job of CEO to that of an orchestra conductor, the business world has been exploring metaphorical comparisons and inspirations from the world of music. Take Boston Philharmonic Orchestra conductor, Benjamin Zander's riff on leadership and creativity for business executives. Or innovation expert, and former Harvard Business school faculty member, John Kao's book *Jamming*, a refrain on improvisation and creativity. Now, Warwick Business School Professors Deniz Ucbasaran and Andy Lockett are hitting all the right notes with their study of famous jazz musicians, *Leading Entrepreneurial Teams: Insights From Jazz*, accentuating some essential insights for entrepreneurial team leaders.

Ucbasaran and Lockett (together with Durham Business School Professor Michael Humphreys) chose jazz for a number of reasons. For a start, jazz bands are synonymous with creativity, improvisation and innovation; all essential ingredients for entrepreneurship. Jazz groups and their members often operate in uncertain and dynamic environments, characterised by unpredictable and rapid change. Yet through collective endeavour many famous jazz bands find their own structure and harmony, despite apparent disorder, and become profitable enterprises – both creatively and commercially.

Note taking

Initially, the authors interviewed many celebrated names in the jazz world, including Wynton Marsalis, Jean Toussaint, and the trumpeter Sean Jones. Eventually, they decided to focus on three names that came up repeatedly in their conversations, three of the most successful and best known names in jazz – Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and Art Blakey. American composer Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was a pioneering jazz orchestra leader from the 1920s through to the 1970s. Trumpet player Miles Davis was instrumental in the development of a number of new jazz styles, including bebop and jazz fusion. Jazz drummer Arthur "Art" Blakey became famous as the leader of his band the Jazz Messengers.

The research focused on the way that these jazz greats created and ran their musical enterprises. In particular, Ucbasaran and Lockett focused on three specific areas of leadership activity: team formation, team coordination and team turnover.

All together now

There were strong similarities in the process the band leaders used to assemble their diverse teams of talent. In particular, they looked for musicians with a different sound or style that was unique to that band member and would improve the overall sound of the band. That uniqueness was as much bound up with the personality of the individual musician, as it was to do with their technical proficiency.

When organisations are tackling team diversity, conventionally they think in terms of a range of characteristics and attributes, such as gender, ethnicity, cultural background and functional skills. However, the evidence from the jazz world suggests that team leaders could embrace a broader concept of diversity when assembling their team of talent. Their hiring decisions should factor in cognitive and personality diversity as desirable team attributes. This is especially true for ventures and teams where high levels of creativity are required, as in the creative industries, biotech, or high-tech start-ups, for example.

Discord and blues

Highly disparate teams, many different personalities, and high levels of creativity is a recipe for group conflict. And, sure enough, there was plenty of dysfunctional conflict, and disruptive and destructive clashes of egos and personalities evident in the jazz ensembles. Traditional team leadership theory suggests that to get the best team performance the leader should foster conflict that promotes productive behaviours – functional conflict – while minimising and eradicating dysfunctional conflict.

But this is difficult when the sources of productive and destructive conflict are the same; that is, differences in personality and thinking. So how do leaders deal with destructive conflict? It didn't seem to bother the likes of Ellington, Davis and Blakey. Their attitude was "the music comes first". Discordant behaviour was tolerated on a journey towards overall harmony. The bad behaviour of individuals, whether that was turning up late for practice, or stepping out of a performance to eat a previously ordered steak, was seen as a small price to pay for the moments of musical genius, when everything came together.

Dysfunctional behaviour appears to go hand in hand with the creative process in these highly disparate teams. Instead of trying to squash the squabbling, team leaders do better deploying strategies to benefit from the creative upside of tension and conflict, while accepting problems arising from the worst behaviour. If musicians were late for practice, for example, Duke Ellington did not get angry, he just started without them. What kept these

leaders' teams together, however, was an overarching higher goal: to create the best music.

Jamming

Teams must coordinate their behaviour and action to achieve an outcome. The team leader can assume a number of different roles when helping the team achieve its objectives. Some leaders are very directive, detailing what tasks they want team members to perform, and how they want them to go about those tasks.

But that was not the approach Ellington, Davis and Blakey adopted. They were more informal. There was very little direct explicit instruction. Instead, these leaders acted more as facilitators, empowering the musicians to collectively coordinate their behaviour and action to produce the desired outcome. As Ucbasaran and Lockett note, Miles Davis discouraged band members from rehearsing in case it led to musical clichés from over practice. Similarly, he often asked his musicians to play a piece in an unusual key, so they did not rely on learned fingering patterns. The performers were not left entirely to their own devices though. The leader created a framework within which team members could work. This framework "balanced guidance and structure with freedom to explore, express and make mistakes."

Duke Ellington, for example, often composed small musical phrases or musical triggers for each musician, say the authors. This ensured a basic level of coordination and pointed them in the right direction, but still provided the freedom for the band member to extemporise.

Innovation and creativity, failure and disappointment, usually go hand in hand. Team members will try things out, some fail, some succeed. Team leaders should create an environment where people feel safe to experiment, to improvise and take risks. "Do not fear mistakes. There are none," Davis is credited as saying.

Squad rotation

The third aspect of leadership behaviour that Ucbasaran and her colleagues looked at was managing team turnover – people joining and leaving the team. In the jazz ensembles studied, musicians joined and left on a regular basis.

Yet the high turnover of team members, despite the resulting loss of knowledge and skills, was seen in a positive light. That was partly because of the benefits of getting a fresh shot of knowledge, ideas and creativity when new members joined.

A common reason for the jazz musicians leaving was that they felt sufficiently qualified to go and run another band. The three band leaders were understanding about this, particularly as it was a process they had also been through. In some cases, in particular with Art Blakey, they actively encouraged and coached team members to become leaders.

Finally, some team members left only to return later on. Ucbasaran and Lockett compare this to organisational techniques such as rotational assignments, that encourage

Deniz Ucbasaran during filming in legendary jazz club Ronnie Scott's

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individuals to gain new skills and knowledge elsewhere and bring them back to the group. It might also be seen as similar to the sabbatical, taking time away from the group and returning with renewed vigour and a fresh perspective on their work.

Hitting the right chord

Ucbasaran and Lockett's study of jazz leaders offers some useful lessons for entrepreneurial leaders, especially where innovation and creativity are paramount. Ellington, Davis and Blakey were fixated on the end objective – making great, exciting, innovative music. To meet that objective they were willing to tolerate and even embrace discordant behaviour among team members. They also promoted individualism and egalitarianism, and created the space for the group members to express themselves and experiment.

To maximise creativity, Ucbasaran and Lockett suggest that leaders should avoid being over prescriptive, and value ambiguity over clarity. While leaders may need to restrain themselves from micromanagement and telling their team members what to do, they have an important role to play in creating frameworks, triggers and cues, setting direction, and providing inspiration to team members. They may also need to stimulate and provoke new responses, and to take measures to avoid the team getting into a rut and falling back on learned responses, especially when under pressure. The team leader can break up

routines, and may benefit from pushing people into unfamiliar, even uncomfortable situations.

If entrepreneurial leaders want high levels of creativity from their team, they must accept that sometimes things will go wrong. The jazz leaders embraced mistakes as part of the process of creating something new and valuable. Team leaders should create room for experimentation, and be forgiving of failure en route to success.

Finally, the evidence shows that rather than part on bad terms, team leaders should respect the wishes of those group members that leave to become leaders in their own right. By maintaining a positive relationship with departing talent, team leaders expand their network of contacts, possibly enabling them to identify talent from elsewhere. And there is always the chance that the departing team member may return at some point in the future.

As the jazz icons Ellington, Davis and Blakey would no doubt agree, there is no magic score that if followed note by note will make you a great leader of creative talent. However, take an entrepreneur, a few cues from the aforementioned jazz trio, mix in a little improvisation, and you are more likely to hear the sweet sound of success. As Louis Armstrong once sang: "Now that's jazz." ∎

Watch Deniz Ucbasaran's short film 'Leadership, creativity and all that jazz' at wbs.ac.uk/go/deniz

ANALYSIS