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Music, Mayhem, and Management Corporate Improvisation and/as Planning in the Face of a Global Pandemic

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Article abstract

This piece examines the ways in which management consulting firms have co-opted concepts drawn from jazz and improvised music to develop corporate responses to the pandemic.

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Music, Mayhem and Management: Corporate Improvisation and/as Planning in the Face of a Global Pandemic

Mike Ford

Only in rare pockets do we find circumstances unchanged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Live entertainment and commercial air travel have been devastated, swaths of white-collar workers are writing memos around their kitchen tables, and improvising musicians have been forced to adapt to performing for online audiences and to playing with online or socially distanced ensembles. The trope of finding opportunity in the face of adversity—or of using uncertainty as a springboard for creativity—has been central to jazz discourses for decades. In this article, I describe how these same tropes have been adopted by management consultancies in response to COVID-19 and the subsequent economic downturn. Consulting firms such as Bain & Company, McKinsey & Company, and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) brief companies on how they should respond to the pandemic by placing considerable, yet implicit, emphasis on improvisatory behaviours and practices. They encourage corporate leaders to assume jazz combo-like organizing models but tend to steer clear of suggesting improvisation explicitly, instead framing recommendations as careful planning. Their guidance includes shortening the time between planning and execution, preparing scenarios for later improvisatory deployment, and creating small teams with decentralized leadership structures to manage the still-unfolding crisis. Although the term *improvisation* is absent from these recommendations,¹ consultancies do indeed encourage companies to improvise in the face of adversity, although the practice is couched in the terminology of planning.

Links between corporate management and improvised music—almost exclusively swing and bebop jazz—have been made since the late 1980s.² Proponents of using jazz metaphors for corporate management maintain that in increasingly volatile business environments, improvisation is key to achieving success. Organizational scholars praise the speed and spontaneity associated with improvisation, regularly referring to a definition by Christine Moorman and Anne Miner, who state: “In improvisation, the time gap between these events narrows so much that, in the limit, composition converges with execution” (1). The convergence of planning and action; composition and realization; and strategy and implementation, is a way for managers to deal with the uncertainties and upheavals of turbulent environments.

Arguing for the transferal of jazz concepts into the realm of business, David Bastien and Todd Hostager find two conventions in jazz particularly useful: its musical structures and social structures. The former includes the harmonic-melodic-rhythmic underpinnings of jazz, as well as the formal conventions of cycling through standard song forms in a head-solos-head configuration. The latter refers to how musicians interact within ensemble formations. These rigid definitions proposed by Bastien and Hostager serve as a foil to what jazz metaphor authors believe to be a common misconception: that improvised music lacks any foundational or structural elements and that there are no formulaic materials from which to draw. For instance, organizational scientist and jazz pianist Frank Barrett maintains that “jazz is *actually very structured* . . . jazz is guided by a *non-negotiable* framework that *constrains* what the soloist can play” (Barrett and Peplowski 558, emphases added). Organizational improvisation scholars regularly allay managerial fears regarding the complete loss of control, and presumed chaos, that free-form improvisation—as opposed to careful planning—is imagined to entail, by highlighting the musical structures and conventions that govern traditional forms of jazz.

The transferable social structures of jazz in business realms center on close intragroup

communication. In order to facilitate such close communication, groups need to be small, which, in turn, has implications for the leadership models they use. Listening and mutual adjustment are key components in both jazz performance and management, yet these methods of interaction become less effective as groups grow in size (Mintzberg 141–42). Therefore, the model most frequently employed is that of the bebop combo rather than the symphony orchestra. The contrast between the combo and the orchestra (albeit somewhat conceptually misguided) also points to diverging leadership structures: orchestras follow command-and-control type hierarchies with the conductor at the top, while jazz ensemble structures are less hierarchical, allowing leadership to alternate among band members as they take turns soloing.

The corporate jazz metaphor rests on the assumption that improvisation permeates everyday existence (Ryle). I rely on composer-trombonist George E. Lewis’s four-part construal of improvisation as comprising indeterminacy, analysis of conditions, agency, and choice (xxii). By using “analysis of conditions” rather than simply “listening,” this construal points to the ubiquity of improvisation, not just an element of jazz, but as “the lifeblood of human experience itself” (xxii). The term *improvisation*, however, is studiously avoided in much managerial discourse outside of jazz metaphor literature. Yet, with the jazz management metaphors in mind, I find strong resonances of improvisation in the recommendations made by top management consultancies on corporate COVID-19 response.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) [notes](#) the turbulence around the pandemic and laments the fact that traditional models cannot keep apace: “most of our frameworks for planning and problem solving are unable to manage the geographic variability, uncertainty, and the exponential change brought by the COVID-19 crisis” (Gjaja et al.). This is in part due to the immediacy of the crisis and the need to respond in real time, recalling the Moorman and Miner definition of improvisation as the confluence of planning and execution. BCG’s François Candelon et al. also [insist](#) that “strategy must be intertwined with execution.” However, immediate steps are not enough—Bain’s Hernan Saenz et al. [state](#) that crisis management teams have to complement “‘deploy now’ actions with corresponding ‘plan for the future’ initiatives.” Companies are thus charged with improvising to deal with both current issues and planning ahead. Yet uncertainty and a lack of useful information hampers both present and future action.

For immediate and improvisatory actions, Candelon et al. [suggest](#) making use of the OODA loop, which was initially developed by the US Air Force and has since been connected to jazz improvisation by Adrian Cho (104). The loop comprises four steps: Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. I map these four actions onto Lewis’s quadripartite definition of improvisation:

OODA loop	Cho explanation (93)	Lewis’s definitional component
(Assumed indeterminacy)		Indeterminacy
Observe	Acquire data through the senses	Analysis of conditions
Orient	Analyze and synthesize data to form a perspective of the situation	
Decide	Determine a course of action based on the perspective	Choice
Act	Implement the decision	Agency

For longer-term planning, consultancies recommend generating projections of multiple possible future scenarios and, in order to bound uncertainty, they then develop relevant responses to each scenario should it arise. This type of preparation includes building up a repertoire of modules to implement for when the time comes. This indicates to me that, although construed as planning during this phase, further improvisation will be required as the crisis unfolds. These scenarios, like well-developed vocabularies of musical formulas, can later be recombined during future improvisations without the need of further planning. However, in contrast to the Moorman and Miner convergence model, McKinsey's Yuval Atsmon et al. [argue](#) for a sharp separation between planning and implementation when developing these scenarios because this separation also has implications for organizational structure.

All three firms propose formalizing similar types of crisis management teams, characterized by cross-functionality, agile working methods, decentralized leadership, and being tasked with gathering information to build and update scenarios. However, interaction among these teams differs according to each firm's respective guidance. Tom Holland et al., writing for Bain, [recommend](#) setting up a single "war room" that coordinates all crisis response. McKinsey, also sticking to military metaphors, [counters](#) that: "Unlike businesses, which tend to assign crisis response to a single war room or management group, a wartime command establishes several teams charged with distinct tasks," [advising](#) leaders to "shift some responsibilities from their command-and-control hierarchy to a network of teams" (Atsmon et al.; D'Auria and De Smet). Within these networked teams, the firm [continues](#), members should have the autonomy and authority to make decisions quickly and effectively—much like the bebop convention of alternating solos (Mysore and Usher). BCG, while [proposing](#) a middle ground of three war rooms, agrees with such a flattening of hierarchies (King et al.), [recommending](#) that "team norms should allow more decentralized decision making and autonomy, such as by introducing a 'default to yes' logic for many noncritical decisions" (Ringel et al.). In addition to the diffusion of leadership, the "yes, and . . ." principle is also familiar to improvisers in the comedy world, although the foundational concept of accepting contributions of collaborators holds across jazz, theater, and business spheres.

One refrain that struck me in many of the briefs is that organizational models tend to favour small and less-hierarchical groups, which they argue have been necessitated by the crisis, and will remain useful beyond the end of the crisis. Refuting the old way of organizing, BCG [maintains](#) that: "While the command-and-control model, which implicitly rests on one-way communication, has worked reasonably well in stable environments, it is ineffective at addressing recent years' exponential increase in business complexity, particularly in unstable times" (Strack et al.) This echoes calls from proponents of the jazz metaphor to embrace improvisation when dealing with turbulent environments. McKinsey's Kevin Sneader and Shubham Singal [laud](#) small groups, claiming that "the flatter decision-making structures many companies have adopted in crisis mode are faster and more flexible than traditional ones." The crisis, according to these firms, provides the impetus to move toward more efficient working methods and better distribution of decision-making power with large organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic casts a bright light on increasingly turbulent business environments, and leaders are being forced to acknowledge and accept improvisatory methods of dealing with rapidly evolving circumstances. Management consulting firms prescribe the constant analysis of conditions, quick decision making, and resolute action in order to navigate such indeterminacy. In addition to adopting these improvisatory ways of thinking and doing, the crisis presents another opportunity where managers can acknowledge, accept, and embrace improvisation as everyday praxis rather than merely as a contingency measure. I find it heartening to see the ways in which corporate leaders might adopt art-making improvisatory approaches. Yet it is the

shared trait of pursuing opportunity in uncertainty, perhaps more than any other commonality, that gives me hope for a future towards which it is worth improvising.

Notes

¹ A notable exception can be found in one McKinsey & Company brief, which explicitly states that “During a crisis, which is ruled by unfamiliarity and uncertainty, effective responses are largely improvised” (D’Auria and De Smet).

² The literature on organizational improvisation scholarship has been summarized by Allègre Hadida et al. (2015) in the business press, while Ken Prouty (2013), Mark Laver (2013), and Nicholas Sorensen (2013), the latter two in this journal, provide musicological perspectives on the jazz metaphor for corporate management.

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