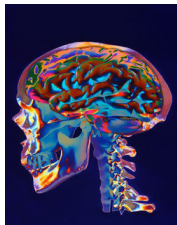


# the art of conversation; lessons from jazz

summary notes from the SOL 2007 conference  
prepared by alex steele



Our premise was that if we can understand more about how jazz performance works, there are lessons for both coaches and our clients. Jazz techniques can be applied to enhance the way we work as individuals, within teams and organisations, how we communicate, how we implement change and generate new ideas. In our session, we wanted to provide a deeper insight into the mind of a jazz musician, and about how interactions between jazz musicians work. Our demonstration of how jazz works was provided by a group of four musicians meeting for the first time on stage.



We suggested that in jazz, perhaps 95% of what happens is improvised, leaving 5% structure remaining. The jazz model is radically different from the orchestral model. The jazz conversation which followed between members of the quartet was also different to a normal conversation, with four voices communicating and interacting simultaneously. We introduced the following themes and jazz tips:

## I: BREAKING HABITS - STAYING ON THE EDGE OF THE COMFORT ZONE

**jazz tip 1: always look for new ways of doing things** : In jazz, we never play a song the same way twice. We say 'if it isn't broken, break it!'. The audience provided a brand new design for a well-known piece of music, and we used that guidance to destroy and rebuild the piece.

**jazz tip 2: break your habit patterns** : In jazz, we must continually strive to ensure what we do is not a routine reaction or automatic response. In organisations, it is easy to say 'but we have always done it this way!', but it's good to change the way we do things.

**jazz tip 3: stop being 'an expert'** : In organisations and life, many people are addicted to certainty, always with an answer. In jazz, we enjoy having no answer, and we are happy to be curious and enjoy the mystery of not knowing.

**jazz tip 4: push yourself and others to the limits of what they know**



## II: JAMMING FOR LEARNING, SUSPENDING JUDGEMENT & BEGINNER'S MIND

**jazz tip 5: do lots of jamming (swarming)** : It is good jazz practice to jam with other musicians, making new contacts, and enjoying fresh external perspectives. Whilst some musicians may be more experienced than others, in the jamming context, all participants are both teachers and learners.

**jazz tip 6: suspend judgement** : Don't be too quick jumping to conclusions. Allow new ideas to evolve without criticism. In jazz, there is no such thing as a wrong note!

**jazz tip 7: encourage all participants to adopt a 'beginner's mind'** : In the mind of the expert there are few possibilities, but in the mind of the beginner there are many. We proposed an extreme example of beginner's mind, by bringing a 'virgin pianist' to the stage. A new piece of music emerged, with 100% improvisation, led by the new pianist.



## III: EXPERIENCING THE JAZZ CONVERSATION

In jazz, we rotate the leadership function within a flat, non-hierarchical structure. Whilst one member is leading (soloing), the other musicians are engaged in active listening and support. We asked four members of the audience to control each of the four jazz musicians, moving them between soloing, supporting and silent modes. The resulting performance enabled the controllers, the musicians and the audience to experience the art of conversation through jazz in a unique way.

### MORE INFORMATION

Alex Steele and his *improwise* team are now on an ongoing international tour. Using professional jazz musicians from every country on the planet, there could be a session with you or your clients at any time, in any place. Great for conferences, workshops and after-dinner inspiration.

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