

Yes to the Mess: surprising leadership lessons from Jazz

Frank J Barrett

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Review by Tricia Lustig

Frank Barrett is a friend of mine whom I have got to know through the Appreciative Inquiry world. In 2005 I had the privilege of experiencing one of Frank's sessions when I worked for BP. We had designed a Strategic HR programme and asked him to run a session on Leadership lessons from jazz. What a joy that was and what fun! So when he told me about his new book, I had to get a copy.

In it, he gives us an answer to the question of how organisations can thrive in today's increasingly uncertain world; it is by building their capacity to experiment, learn and innovate. Frank postulates that these skills are exactly those needed by successful jazz musicians.

Frank Barrett is Professor of Management and Global Public Policy at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and has also taught at Harvard Business School. He has also been a professional jazz musician and has played with many of the greats. It is this that makes the lessons he draws so real – he is telling us stories of how different well known jazz musicians played and how the improvisation relates to successful organisational behaviour.

The first chapter is about mastering the art of unlearning. We need to do this because we will and must go into uncharted territory since our environment grows more and more uncertain and we can no longer control things. We need to add the skills of improvisation and letting go so we can discover (and learn) as we go. We must let go of what brought us success in the past in order to free ourselves to learn what we need to be successful today and tomorrow.

Then he moves on to talk about developing Affirmative Competence. It takes the idea of improvisation in an organisation one step further; it's about people making continuous offers, back and forth. The other person accepts the offer and moves it forward. This is true learning by doing, as well as working with what you have got. Frank reminds us that the first step for enhancing creativity and innovation is an affirmative move. It means assuming that the 'mess' and uncertainty leads to a worthwhile outcome.

He talks about Performing and Experimenting Simultaneously. Or practising and keeping what works in SF terms – fast-prototyping would be another way to describe it. He points to research that shows that those who are willing to publicly discuss mistakes and *co-learn from them* accelerate their learning process. A jazz musician assumes that any situation can be turned into a good one by doing the right things with the notes (looking for affirmative potential and seizing it). Organisations that fail to learn from errors become vulnerable to predictable surprises.

And how about this for an idea: Minimal Structure – Maximal Autonomy (Or balancing freedom and constraints). Chaordic systems are a combination of order and chaos. In them we have some non-negotiable constraints which we need in order for chaos to lead to creativity and something positive.

In the effort to streamline and be efficient, organisations attempt to systematically avoid changes and ambiguity by creating standard operating procedures (SOPs), clear goals, and centralised control. This does not help them to be creative or adapt as the environment around them changes. It doesn't help them to do more of what works, because they don't evaluate to see what *is* working and what isn't (it's not normally part of SOPs). Excessive specification can limit a person's imagination and thus their ability to respond in the moment. People need to be able to explore and experiment with novel ideas (autonomy) while still staying loyal to essential routines (structure). Minimal structure can create maximum authority to act.

Frank likens jamming to learning together. This occurs

when two, three or more are joined in a common purpose, common practice, and common desire to raise the bar for everyone involved. He calls it learning by serendipity. It is a “type of improvisation; a patching together of bits and pieces of experience to cope with problems that don’t provide definitive solutions”. In other words, sharing what works and putting it together to make it work in the new situation. He goes on. “Stories of past successes form a community memory that others can draw upon when facing unfamiliar problems”. Creativity and innovation are inherently social and involve linking current, past, learning and interconnectivity. As Jackson & McKergow (2007) noted in their book *The Solutions Focus* (2007), the action (learning, creativity and innovation) happens in the interactions *between* people.

Good leaders in today’s world, Frank suggests, are those who can create space that suggests possibilities, yet at the same time provide the right amount of constraint, structure and boundaries. They notice people’s potential. They hold a positive view of what others are capable of. Even if someone isn’t exhibiting the best of what is there, they are able to see it and encourage this ‘best’ to come out by inviting people to live in hopeful stories of the future. They inspire positive alternatives and potential. And that in turn, influences it to happen.

These are just a few examples – I found the book very rich and will read it again. SF practitioners will find a lot that resonates (I did). The underlying principle of affirmative competence and seeing the best of what people hold within them, the playing with what works and how one might squeeze a little more of what works out, the learning and examining not just what has been learned, but how it has been learned, these are all things that I associate with SF.

I also love the jazz references. I am a VERY amateur jazz singer, but I do know how much work is involved in improvisation. From my own experience, before I perform, I do my homework. I listen to every version of a particular piece I can find. And I practise. So, I know that I’ve done my homework and I’ve got lots of possible things that work at my fingertips. I can build on any of those – and on any of the other music I

know – as and when I need to. It is scary and daunting, but I prepare and then just trust. I trust the other musicians I'm playing with, I trust my innate knowledge, curiosity, learning skills and my understanding of the space within which we operate (the song, the key, the skills of my fellow musicians) – our loose boundaries. I play win/win and go for it. It doesn't always work, but we amplify what does and learn whichever way it turns out. That, for me, is what this book is about. I recommend it and I hope that you enjoy it as I did.

References

Jackson, P. Z., & McKergow, M. (2007). *The Solutions Focus: making coaching & change SIMPLE* (2nd ed.). London: Nicholas Brealey International.

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