

"An insider's guide to translating the creative techniques of jazz to the business world."  
—Scott Branson, author of *The Myths of Innovation*

# the Jazz Process

COLLABORATION,  
INNOVATION,  
AND AGILITY

ADRIAN CHO

## Book The Jazz Process

### Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility

Adrian Cho

Addison-Wesley, 2010

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## Recommendation

Adrian Cho leads a jazz orchestra in Canada when he isn't developing IBM software. Now he wants to tell you how Miles Davis can change your business life. Cho touts jazz units such as Davis' immortal, innovative bands as models for high-performance teamwork. He derives 14 best practices from observing that standout performers in good jazz groups work together in an environment of alert listening and mutual respect to make great music off the cuff. He doesn't limit his examples to jazz, finding combo cognates in basketball, auto racing and the military. The upshot is a concept of leadership and teamwork that's well suited for the Google-age workplace. Alas, the text is dense and the graphics aren't very helpful. Trying to parse the earnest but process-heavy prose may make you play the blues. Still, *BooksInShort* recommends this innovative book to human resources professionals, executives and managers needing new harmonies, and employees who know they could make a better contribution if only someone would let them play a solo.

## Take-Aways

- Jazz groups are great models for business teams that want to excel.
- Too many rules can kill the creativity your business needs the most.
- Foster an environment that rewards passion and allows mistakes.
- Watch for destructive feedback loops, and move quickly to cut them off.
- Good observation, like careful listening in a jazz group, keeps teams alert to change.
- Decentralized command supports initiative and allows workers to switch freely between leader and follower roles.
- Transparency is vital for the health of high-performing teams.
- Friction isn't always bad. Companies need it to remain competitive.
- Fundamentally, healthy business operations and growth are predicated on a continual dialogue that allows for hearing great ideas and making innovative changes.
- The more diverse your team is, culturally and by experience, the more ideas and options it will have and the better it will manage risk and achieve excellence.

## Summary

### The Joy of Collaboration

Humans have always collaborated, but simply adding more people to a work effort doesn't necessarily mean higher productivity. The real goal is to create synergy, which is more likely to happen when a group is small – a five-member basketball team, a jazz trio – and members contribute at their peak. Envision your work as a collaborative artistic performance by studying the example of jazz. These musicians fashion their product on the fly by maximizing individuality, minimizing rules and

listening to each other. Their pivotal skills include innovation and improvisation, which require on-the-spot analysis and reacting to unexpected changes in the music. Being able to improvise is crucial in today's business climate, and so is having the collaborative agility demonstrated by a good jazz combo.

"Jazz can serve as an inspiration and example for anyone seeking to improve the skills of leadership, teamwork, innovation and communication."

Software code developers follow a set of rigid rules to maximize stability, but a jazz trio follows looser rules that deliberately encourage instability. Effective team building requires clear rules and a cooperative mentality that works within appropriate guidelines. Instead of enforcing a statutory code, provide axioms that embody a way of doing things, such as the 14 principles of the "Jazz Process":

1. **"Use just enough rules"** – Societies use rules to stay organized and so do societal units such as businesses, bands and sports teams. Such rules must not be so confining that they hinder autonomy amid constant change and improvement.
2. **"Employ top talent"** – The quality of your employees is the chief determinant of your success. Knowing this, composer Duke Ellington wrote for specific players in his orchestra. Creative individuals increasingly dominate the world of work, because they supply high-value contributions. These employees are critical, as evidenced by Miles Davis' legendary second quintet. Davis' leadership made the quintet a powerhouse, but such group efforts also rely on the ability of skilled people to collaborate, a talent that requires "social awareness." Firms that want to be lean and competitive should seek the best talent so they can build small, agile teams. Raising a team's skill level isn't always easy, but encouraging merit can lift the whole enterprise.
3. **"Put the team first"** – Good jazz depends on a team-first approach, which means handling errors and celebrating success as a unit. The downside to this concept is groupthink, which crops up when organizations stifle divergent thinkers in the name of cohesion. Healthy groups build "team awareness" while recognizing individual contributions. Hiring the best talent while also putting the team first keeps organizational efforts in balance.
4. **"Build trust and respect"** – Trust, which is instinctive, and respect, which must be earned, are fundamental to building strong teams and creating satisfying work environments that nurture loyalty, pride in achievement and motivation. Jazz musicians must build trust quickly when they perform. To begin, they grant basic respect to players they don't know, trusting that each one offers something special. They expect support from each player. The bassist is supposed to supply a strong musical framework of harmony and pulse in which everyone can operate. This is a function of transparency, a trait big businesses in particular should emulate. Team communication must be honest. To repair trust and respect in troubled firms, executives should shoulder the blame for mistakes and show that they understand the impact of their actions.
5. **"Commit with passion"** – Commitment is a critical stabilizing element for high-performing teams, so businesses must try harder to inculcate dedication. Firms mustn't burden their stars with excess regulation, or suggest that team members are unevenly committed. Low commitment means poor follow-through, cracks in the team's foundation, and trouble during delicate situations when the focus shifts to one person or project component. Boosting loyalty is easier during major group efforts, but employees should be committed all the time. Such conviction is essential in jazz, where a soloist's mistake won't sound like an error if the musician plays with confidence. Davis' landmark album, "Kind of Blue," shows how commitment created a classic. The musicians had slim guidelines for its songs, but their complete involvement led to great music. Even more important is passion, the fire that spurs people to be remarkable despite difficulties. Passion has to be real.
6. **"Listen for change"** – Execution starts with listening. The Jazz Process' principles of execution originate with cybernetics, defined in 1948 by MIT mathematician Norbert Wiener, who helped develop methods for predicting flight paths and tracking German air force bombers. Cybernetics uses positive and negative feedback loops, which change systems by reinforcing or discontinuing actions. Researchers detected such loops in the way German Blitzkrieg pilots used decentralized command, speed and skill to lock opponents into fruitless search cycles. During the Korean War, US Air Force fighter pilot Col. John Boyd, a legendary flyer and aircraft designer, researched a four-step "decision cycle," or feedback pattern, called the "OODA Loop" – "observe, orient, decide, act." It says success requires attention followed by smart, agile decision making. Managers must absorb as much data as possible. Yet in large hierarchies, an overload of data means some data gets lost before it reaches top management. Managers must distinguish "noise" from data "signals." Leaders can use metrics to gauge performance but they must avoid excessive reliance on numbers as a guide to action.
7. **"Lead on demand"** – Leadership means wielding the power of taking initiative. If every member tries it, the team will become more nimble and engaged. Jazz performers routinely take the initiative in response to other players, creating changes that foster exciting music. Lateral rather than top-down leadership is healthy for multidisciplinary teams with high-performing members. Exceptional musicians came in and out of Miles Davis' bands, and also led their own separate projects. A jazz ensemble's musical leadership often changes during a set, keeping the sound fresh and surprising. In contrast, business leadership remains centralized in traditional, command-and-control structures. Yet, during turbulence, teams can't use free-for-all decision making. Jazz offers a solution in its unique blend of leading and following; players can do one or the other at a moment's notice. Change is constant, but so is open self-expression.
8. **"Act transparently"** – Leaders must behave transparently and be clear and open so people understand their actions. Having more data helps bolster members' confidence in the team's direction. Even more important is being truthful with your staffers and customers. Authenticity is a modern business requirement. Genuine credibility requires capability, trustworthiness, identity and believability. Consumers want organizations to be more open, and so do executives and employees, who often find their firms too opaque. A NASA study of simulated accidents found that pilots who talked openly with their flight crews were likelier to respond to a crisis correctly. Organizations also need timeliness, both in providing feedback and in meshing project components. Clarity is central, too, but only internally; keeping your competitors in the dark and off-balance should be part of your strategy. Use transparency selectively.
9. **"Make contributions count"** – Not every contribution to a collaborative enterprise adds value or is positive. Often, participants who want to contribute can do so by being resourceful, which adds resilience to group efforts. When Davis took Dizzy Gillespie's slot in Charlie Parker's quintet, Davis knew he wasn't a Gillespie-style flashy, virtuosic player, so he fashioned a minimalist style, using brief moments of lyricism and canny silence. He pursued modal jazz, a more stripped-down aesthetic than Gillespie's aggressive bebop, and made it the centerpiece of "Kind of Blue." Davis showed the value of playing a limited number of notes, but shrewdly. This less-is-more approach to collaboration allows participants to spend more time observing than reacting. Value also is linked to timing. Well-paced contributions – never too early or too late – are easier to incorporate. Collaborators should be aware that proximity to other team members could affect their work. Being too close physically or virtually can stifle agile, innovative responses.
10. **"Reduce friction"** – In business, friction makes transactions hard to execute. Some friction is normal, but some comes from mistakes or internal processes burdened with rules. Some Jazz Process principles can reduce friction, as can "social lubrication," the symbolic grease you apply by accepting responsibility for errors or product flaws, or by providing simple instructions for customers. Even small talk can reduce friction. But while you must cut friction to increase sales, in some contexts it has a purpose. In jazz, playing unexpected notes in a standard chord progression creates a kind of friction that adds musical interest. In the economy, a frictionless competitive situation allows open entry, but doesn't let anyone make strong profits. Businesses must calibrate the best amount of friction for each situation, and lubricate if necessary.
11. **"Maintain momentum"** – When things move in a positive direction, your firm has "constructive momentum." Maintain it by focusing on regularity and

predictability, and by attending to four aspects of your business. “Form,” the basic structure of an organizational activity, should be predictable to build synergy. “Tempo” is the speed of execution, where going too fast or too slow can cause problems. Agile teams can respond well to sudden tempo changes. The “pulse” of a project or a jazz song comes out of its tempo as a regular, internal beat the team or the musicians use to hold things together. For instance, a team working within an uncongenial tempo (like an outside deadline) can use its natural pulse to remain unified. “Groove,” part of pulse, consists of regular, repeated meetings and group activities. A team can maintain momentum by understanding these parameters and even adding its own grooves of regular, steady events. Teams must remain flexible enough to improvise when need be and still keep the operation stable. Jazz musicians use syncopation – rhythmic variations off the pulse – to drive momentum. Teams can use the same idea, adding contributions at unexpected times while remaining faithful to their project’s pulse.

12. **“Stay healthy”** – Exceptional teams may suffer enterprise health problems or instability because of the stress of pursuing excellence. A compromised system kills team morale and makes customers uncomfortable. Firms can regenerate after a period of poor health if the injury is not too severe, but deeper wounds may call for outside help, such as more personnel. Catastrophic events are unforeseeable, but firms can mitigate potential injuries by monitoring their organizational health.
13. **“Exchange ideas”** – Innovation and creativity are well-studied business ideas. Successful innovation requires uniting two kinds of thinking: divergent and convergent. This means floating ideas and then checking their practicability. The goal is uniqueness, which lures customers and enlivens a team. Creativity improves organizational decision making by allowing continual openness to new ideas. True innovations are almost always the product of multiple thinkers and doers, even with such inventions as the light bulb and the car. Exchanging ideas is fundamental, as when jazz artists work with dancers. Jazz players “riff off one another, using one musician’s melody as an entry into another’s solo, just as in Davis’ ‘So What’.” To benefit from innovation and creativity, a corporate culture must allow for mistakes and let team members innovate together, as they do in Google’s brainstorming “grouplets.”
14. **“Take measured risks”** – Managing risk mandates identifying a possible peril, then deciding how to handle it: from avoiding it to ignoring, sharing or exploiting it. This is a vital team skill, as is diversity, which invites more ideas and more risk management options.

“Jazz is democratic. Jazz is genuine. Jazz is joyful and at times soulful. Jazz is all of these things. However, it’s not just the end result that’s interesting but the process of making the music.”

Best practices can help teams flourish, but each of these 14 principles has a downside: Using just enough rules can jeopardize control; employing top talent can mean dependence on transient, highly skilled workers; putting the team first can smother individuality; building trust and respect can foster unhealthy tight cohesion; passion may spur excess commitment; listening for change can founder if feedback is mishandled; leading on demand may generate chaos; acting transparently shows competitors your problems; making contributions count might encourage weak efforts; reducing friction might hamper performance; maintaining momentum isn’t a good thing if you’re headed in the wrong direction; staying healthy might weaken your responses if you call in help too soon; and exchanging ideas could make the company unstable and lead to undesirable outcomes such as “feature creep.” Ultimately, the Jazz Process is about healthy collaboration and continual learning. For business teams to profit from this approach, they have to be aware of the opportunities they can pursue, and frank about what they need to correct.

## About the Author

**Adrian Cho** is a software development manager for IBM and a jazz bassist who directs the Ottawa Jazz Orchestra of Canada. A former management consultant, he covers teamwork at [www.jazzprocess.com](http://www.jazzprocess.com).

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