



C O R P O R A T E C O A C H I N G

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– The Art of Improvisation**
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QUARTERLY COLUMN

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIVISION HEAD



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Welcome to yet another exciting edition of the International Coaching News (iCN) online magazine! For our **28th edition**, our theme is *Corporate Coaching*. This edition is loaded with content on a variety of relevant topics on the issues that come with the latest trends of corporate coaching, latest coaching models, resources, tips, techniques to help coaches & entrepreneurs to achieve business goals & potential.

The iCN is proud to have collaborated with several renowned international columnists, expert coaches and best-selling authors to provide insights on corporate coaching. Look out for the feature article '5 Ways to Start Planning Your Corporate Exit' by *Sofia Pacifico Reis* from United Kingdom. Sofia shares her strategies in transitioning from the corporate world to being an entrepreneur. Another noteworthy article 'Jazz Music & Coaching - The Art of Improvisation' by *Malcolm Nicholson*, explains that there is not one way of dealing with coaching in the complex business environment, nor one way of coaching in leadership roles. In our Quarterly Column by *Dr. Keith Merron* 'The Art of Coaching for Personal Transformation'. Dr. Keith discusses coaching third-order problems or three different ways of understanding a problem & how to help potential pattern. 'Gamification – The Secret That is Revolutionising The Future of Leadership' by *Brenda Jacobson*, is an interesting read where Brenda shares how by integrating the latest in neuroscience with game dynamics to train the brain to develop emotional intelligence as a HABIT, helps develop new skills and accelerates soft-skill acquisition by combining information with a positive experience.

Each of our columnists, too numerous to mention individually, has taken some really interesting perspectives, and I would encourage a thorough read-through of this edition.

Just like all our other editions, this is not just an interesting read, but it provides you with helpful personal development ideas and professional development techniques to grow your business and improve your lifestyle. I hope you enjoy this issue and do let us know if there are any topics you'd like to see covered in the future.

Leeann

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Jazz Music & Coaching – The Art of Improvisation

by Malcolm Nicholson (UK)

At first sight, jazz music and executive coaching may seem to be rather strange bedfellows – and not words you often see in the same sentence!

However, a deeper dive shows that there are indeed many, many similarities between the two respective arts (or professions?)

Let's have a look at some of the similarities. Both require individuals to have:

- Technical mastery
- Curiosity
- A growth mindset
- A focus on the here and now
- Ability to react to what has just been heard
- Lifelong learning
- Awareness of the impact of their communication
- A vocabulary
- Outcome focussed & clarity of vision
- Bring the best out in those around them

They also require their output to have:

- Improvisation; working up possibilities from an initial statement
- Tempo
- A structure; a beginning, middle & end
- A pitch
- Use of silence

- A context that can be simple, complicated, complex or chaotic
- Creative dialogue
- Collective intelligence
- Relevance

For a jazz musician these change from number to number. For coaches, each coaching intervention. (Though both of course can have sub-division of the units). As with mastery of any field of human endeavour, the approach is based on sound technique - or 'nailing' the hard skills; experiential learning – 'woodshedding' or supervised coaching - and reflective learning. In other words, finding out how to do it, doing it and reviewing how well you did. Getting to this stage is a variation on the old adage 'I charged you \$100, of which \$10 was hitting the pipe. The other \$90 was for knowing WHERE to hit the pipe!!'

However, the real transformation from journeying protagonist to consummate performer comes when exponents have mastered those hard skills so well that they can lock them up, to produce 'music of the moment'. For example, I saw a jazz group when a member was making an introduction.

The piano player was ‘noodling’ (as Frank Zappa called jazz improvisation) in the background. The announcer said ‘That was nice – do it again!’ After a couple of attempts the pianist gave up and said – ‘I can’t. It is gone. Music of the moment.’

Equally, a recent coaching conversation was around a person’s self-talk and subsequent lack of confidence; however, when he presented (even in front of large audiences) he was ‘in-flow’, with his subconscious taking ascendancy, his self-talk marginalised and he presented with ease and competence. (Music of the moment!)

So what we see with any great proponent is not that complex situations can be shaped into the structure of one dimensional tools – metronomes, scales, 4 box matrices or questionnaires – rather, it is intuitively using these as a basis for an improvised output, in combination with flexibility and deep, creative thinking that is crucial to navigating the challenging situations either set of proponents face.

‘To become more agile and adept, coaches may need to consider different approaches to their work. The traditional approach, with its emphasis on competence, may not always suffice. The coach may usefully explore the dialogic approach in service of ultimately being able to work systemically. Working systemically means noticing patterns of relationships, and emergence of new meanings from those relationships, even relationships that to us as coaches, may be invisible.’ (Lawrence & Moore)

How do I get there?



So, can non-improvising musicians or command and control managers/coaches learn this level of improvisatory performance?

Well, yes, they can; however, it requires unlearning and developing new habits and ways of communicating that are driven by the subconscious rather than the conscious mind. It’s like a tennis player about to return a serve; evaluation or conscious input would slow the process down so as to be ineffective. The subconscious weighs up the possibilities, chooses and decides the timing, coordination of the muscles and anything else that is required to make it happen in a fraction of a second. Be it blowing a saxophone or coaching a cross cultural team.



In the photo:
Vibraphonist Gary Burton and guitarist Julian Lage

Gary Burton, jazz vibraharpist and educator said

‘As I start to play a song, in those first few moments of playing I step back from the process mentally, and the playing starts going on its own. I start watching it as if I am an observer. The unconscious mind is now doing it. It is very natural for me now, after doing it for years. It was not so natural in my early days when I was much more conscious about my playing. But you learn to trust your unconscious mind.’

(Fast Company)

Why is this important in coaching?

Anyone coaching in organisations today knows that the level of complexity faced by people is beyond that which we are designed to handle. Indeed, we are currently experiencing a morphing of reality at a geopolitical level referred to as 'Information Chaos' (Carole Cadwalladr). Robert Kegan – a psychologist and expert on adult learning, wrote a book called 'In over our Heads – the mental demands of modern life'.

Equally, if coaches are not aware of and capable of understanding and being one step ahead with such circumstances, it is unlikely they will be maximising the impact their coaching could be having... Music is often described as expressing the emotions we cannot put into words. And as with good jazz musicians, coaches have to interpret the silence, the unsaid and to facilitate the listener's internal interpretation of the other person's communication.

The complexity of this current environment means that coaches will often be required to coach in the intersection of various disciplines. Clear cut is no more...

An Example:



I have been a visiting lecturer on an international MBA course in one of France's top 5 business schools. Last year we discussed ongoing workplace feedback. I sat in on a practice session with a Vietnamese woman and an older more senior (from previous experience) Japanese woman. The former could not provide feedback, not through lack of awareness as they were working to a scenario, but her cultural norms would not permit her. Skills intersects with CQ (intercultural quotient) intersects with coaching intersects with EQ!

How does 'music of the moment' play out in coaching?



Choosing an approach from the playbook is part art, part science. It is intriguing to be in a different place to some business leaders who are nearer the command and control end of the scale when working with new teams. You know, 'what is the agenda?' 'What approaches will you be using?' 'How will we measure this?' etc. Sometimes I'll work with an organisation on the desired outcomes I will be aiming to help the team get to. The agenda - that is, the tools, (scales, rhythms, tempo etc) - can often depend on co-creation with the group. Music in the moment.

An Example

I had a kick-off session with a multi-national (and intercultural) team. The agenda had 1 hour to itemise existing issues. 5.5 hours later, they were still going!! This was a classic example of 'music of the moment.' I knew that if we stuck to the agenda and papered over the cracks these issues were causing, it would have meant that the rest of the day would be meaningless. It may have been long at the time ('The tyranny of the now') but it in the history of the company and the period of time since, it was nothing. It surfaced trust issues and enabled the exec to change the level of conversation they were having with each other, based on a more profound understanding of each other's perspectives.

Getting in the zone.



Many years ago, a young saxophonist sat in with a group of jazz professionals in a nightclub. He lost the tune, then the rhythm. Next thing, the drummer threw a cymbal at his feet, landing with a loud crash, followed by jeers and laughter from the audience. Whilst the saxophonist - a 16-year-old named Charlie Parker – went on to become a jazz and cultural legend, at that stage in his career he had not mastered the tools of the trade.

Today, there are extremely large numbers of coaches with 2 years or less experience. Now, some may go on to become Coaching Legends, however in a commercial environment there is a decision to be made for the less experienced coach around what to tackle, revenue flow, reputational damage and a self-awareness of their own capabilities.

My premise is that there is not one way of dealing with coaching in the complex business environment, nor one way of coaching in leadership roles. By taking a leaf from the jazz musician's approach, experienced coaches can develop some ways of thinking and dealing with complex international business situations that might make your existing approaches even more effective and impactful.

PS. And at this point I should declare my hand. I was a semi professional musician for a number of years. After a long break from playing I was recently asked by a client company to join their band for concerts and recording, which led, amongst other events, to me being flown out to Switzerland to record for 5 days!



ABOUT MALCOLM NICHOLSON

Malcolm Nicholson is the owner and Coaching Director for [Aspecture](#), and has worked successfully with a wide range of senior business people for 20 years, enabling them to improve business results through transformational changes. To find out how he can help your organisation contact him at malcolmnicholson@aspecture.com or on +44 1932 267597.

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