

# Beyond Winging It: Leadership & Improvisation

Whenever school boards define the qualities they desire in a new leader, inevitably they want someone facile at planning. “We want a superintendent who can implement our strategic plans and get results.” Few, if any, mention, “We want a person who is an excellent improviser.”

As the old saying goes, “the best laid plans . . .” often get derailed in the non-linear world in which we live. The world is not a static place. And, schools are not clockworks operating by logical cause-and-effect precision. Plans sputter and flop. In this type of world improvising is a great asset. However, improvisation and leadership are seldom mentioned in the same breath. Improvisation is the Rodney Dangerfield of leadership – it gets no respect.

Rigidly sticking to plans in such a dynamic environment is a recipe for failure. Emotional, non-linear, non-quantifiable, and hidden forces derail the best of plans. It is not what is manifest that is the problem. It is what is emerging that creates havoc for plans. Chaos and non-rationality prevail and are a part of all open social systems.

Leaders, however, must get the job done – disequilibrium and chaos be damned! They know when to stick to a plan and when to improvise. After all, leadership is a creative force that builds imaginative relationships and interconnections that energizes people to achieve and accomplish great things. How does improvisation and leadership fit? What are the advantages and hazards of improvisation?

## **Why Improvise?**

In Sir Isaac Newton’s 16<sup>th</sup> Century world, part-to-whole thinking and linear logic reigned. Based on these assumptions, strategic plans should work and people should act with rational precision. The ‘machinery’ of management would succeed because everyone would do their ‘part’ and respond as anticipated.

But the world is not like Newton thought. It is full of hidden and interconnected fields and forces that cannot be seen or measured that affect people and plans. The spate of leadership books dispels Newtonian notions because if they were true, leaders would only have to implement and monitor plans and they would succeed. Books on ‘engineering’ would dominate, not ones on the challenges and dilemmas of leadership.

Leaders face two types of decisions. Substantive decisions concern destinations -- the desired goals and objectives -- the ‘whys’ and ‘whats’ of plans. On the other hand, tactical or strategic decisions involve the processes and approaches to get to the destination – the ‘hows’ leaders employ to achieve the ‘whys’ and ‘whats’ -- success.

Improvisation generally affects the tactical decisions on how to reach goals and maintain the integrity of the organization. Noble goals are achieved because of the great insight of leaders to read situations and

respond tactically in effective and constructive ways. Many strategic decisions involve the intangibles of organizational life and the intuitive ways of knowing and understanding.

Successful superintendents are aware of the obvious and subtle dynamics of situations. They learn and know through data and intuition, develop the insight and foresight to read observable situations, and understand the invisible fields and forces at play. These leaders know when to change course to reach a goal. Professional superintendents know when to be creative and break convention ethically and with integrity to be successful. Steering the course to success may require ingenuity and improvisation.

### **What is Improvisation?**

Improvisation is essential for leaders to work in a confusing context where things are ambiguous and confusing. Metaphorically, leaders are more like jazz musicians than they are like symphony conductors.

Symphony conductors help musicians interpret the music, its feeling and meaning. They rely on a written score with specific notes and dynamics that charts the plan for the music as defined by the composer. Certainly there are different interpretations, and tempos may vary but changing the themes, chords, dynamics, and notes is not in the score – the plan. Control rests with the composer.

Jazz musicians, however, have more latitude to create around the chords and themes in a piece. Jazz is not everyone doing his or her own thing, nor is it random noise. There is a structure and discipline to it [goals] and integrity [chords]. But, serendipity, invention, creativity, and spontaneity are valued. Each musician may improvise in an individualistic way and still be in harmony with the overall meaning and feeling of the piece.

In music there are chords around which the tune is composed. The chords and melody are the basic structures around which a jazz musician improvises -- building on themes, taking a minimalist view or expounding on them in dramatic or subtle ways. They also play 'off' the creativity of each other, building on the improvised expression of colleagues. At times, there even may be collective improvisation as players listen and respond to each other or the soloist. They have a 'conversation' around themes . . . they listen, they relate, they create, they innovate, they surprise, they extrapolate, they emote.

In all cases, the chords and tune set the stage and ultimate destination. Yet the chords, like corporate values and principles, allow for creative approaches, techniques and methods to be implemented, while preserving the integrity of the piece.

Improvisation has several key components. To institute these components requires some key characteristics. Technique is important: understanding the processes, tools and instruments and being nimble in their application. Knowledge of the 'classic' approaches and processes and having the skills to implement them are critical if a leader is to improvise on them. In addition, intuition, synthesis, and creativity are essential to improvising.

The components to improvising in jazz include: embellishing on the theme, phrasing, and finding new patterns or motifs. In addition, there are several approaches that make these components effective:

- **When to play** – In music as in leadership there is a time to play and a time to rest. Pacing and silence become important, as well as the quantity and nature of activity.
- **How to play** – Content and execution are very important and often are dependent on each other. Poor content excellently delivered is hollow. Great content poorly delivered is a waste.
- **What to play** – The chords and melody form the basis for the embellishments, variations, and phrasing. Synthesis and creative perception, seeing the world with new eyes and anticipating what is emerging, are important here.

In jazz, as in leading and working in schools, individual 'riffs' are risky because they are revealing but they create a sense of contribution and meaning. Efficacy, having a sense of value and contributing to an enterprise with a purpose, is more important than empowerment.

### **Improvisation: Constructs and Dilemmas**

Paradox is a part of life, and the same is true for planning and improvisation. Just as adhering strictly to a plan can create failure, so can blind adherence to improvisation. Superintendents need to understand what drives improvisation.

These drives include:

- **Bricolage** - Improvisation may require the skillful use and application of available resources to get the job accomplished, often with limited or different materials.  
Plans get stifled due to inadequate materials, either because they were lacking in the first place or because there is not enough time to get them.
- **Intuition** – Time is a factor in many decisions. Frequently judgments have to be made without hard, analytical data because it is not available or cannot be obtained. In addition, there are forces at play that cannot be measured or seen that affect conclusions. Superintendents with a deep knowledge of their jobs understand things without formal analysis and can make choices that are necessary to achieve goals. They know when to follow plans and when to modify or deviate from them even when the formal data say otherwise.
- **Memory** – Leaders have knowledge and skills. Superintendents need two types of memory to improvise. First, there is declarative knowledge – facts – from which they can make sense and meaning from the patterns they see. Second, they require procedural memory -- the skills and routines to get things done. Procedural skills are needed to access knowledge so that appropriate action can be taken.
- **Creativity and Learning** – Improvisation is a creative act. Conditions may call for moving beyond the script or plan. Creative leaders know how to apply procedural memory in novel ways or deviate from their normal application. There is a bit of trial and error to improvisation, which requires some nimbleness and flexibility on the part of the leader.

How do you assess the impact of improvising? The question is: *does improvising solve the problem?* To improvise for improvisation's sake is not the point. If it does not solve the problem then it is no better than pursuing rigid plans that cannot accommodate unknown and unforeseen factors.

### **IMPROVISING: DILEMMAS**

- *How do you create and maintain an organizational structure that allows spontaneity, creativity, and improvisation?*
- *How do you improvise without totally destroying the concepts and integrity of the plan?*
- *How do you improvise and maintain order in an organization?*
- *Can you create a strong team and still have creative virtuosos?*
- *How do you balance individual autonomy with group or organizational needs?*
- *How do you create efficient systems that are also effective? How do you make music, rather than just play notes?*
- *How do you develop a creative organization and maintain credibility to your basic values?*

Second, did improvising create *unexpected consequences that can reap great advantages?* Unanticipated opportunities may surface because a leader took a creative or unexpected course. These opportunities may open doors to achievement that were not evident before.

Third, *does improvising destroy the integrity of the organization?* Means do not justify ends. Selling out the values, and principles of the school district to achieve a goal does irreparable harm and eventually devastates the value-driven behavior necessary for successful professional organizations.

Fourth, *does improvising produce learning and provide a new or unique slant on an issue causing*

*people to think differently?* People learn and incorporate new ways to achieve goals or to relate to each other differently because improvisation showed new possibilities. Improvising can increase the capacity of people and organizations.

Finally, *does improvising increase the efficiency of the organization because it boosts the speed at which things get accomplished.* Through improvising, we sometimes learn that steps can be cut out of a process and we can still achieve our goals. It can speed action, and when time and resources are limited, this can be a great advantage.

### **Leadership and Improvisation**

Great leaders know how and when to improvise. They are disposed to achieving goals and to building the capacity of their organizations. This requires nimbleness and flexibility, not tightness and rigidity.

Strict adherence to procedural plans in changing and uncertain times only creates frustration and failure. Blaming the environment or others for failure betrays a victim mentality. Leaders are not victims. They find ways to address the unexpected or the recalcitrant and move ahead. If failure is their companion, then it is not for lack of taking destiny into their own hands. Hand wringing and blaming are not in the cards.

Superintendents, like other leaders, are disciplined. They are tight around values and ethics but flexible around procedures. Values and principles set the limits for improvisation, acting like the chords in a jazz piece. They determine what improvisational strategies fit the school district's culture and calling, and which are off limits. School leaders build a crucible of leadership in which professionals can use discretion and improvise in getting the job done with integrity.

There is an art to leadership. There are management techniques and data banks and measurable indicators. But, superintendents cannot run a school district with dot-to-dot processes or tasks. It is not painting by the numbers. And metrics do not tell the whole story.

The art of leadership rests on intangibles. Some musicians are highly technically proficient on their instruments but play with no emotional fervor or interpretative creativity. They play a string of notes. They don't make music.

Heart is important to accomplishment. Leaders need passion, creativity and energy. Persistence. Finding a way to succeed. All are a part of improvising, using what you have, testing and piloting, and intuitively taking risks to adapt, adjust, and deviate.

The answer to leading and improvising lies in goals, values, and principles, the chords that allow improvisation with integrity. Improvisation is not everyone going his or her own way. It is not dissonant noise – it is harmony with values and purpose and leaders' need to act and achieve.

Great movements have 'dynamic tension' between plans and circumstances -- between adherence to set strategy and adapting to the unknown and the quirks of life. Leaders are leaders because they live for these moments and the challenges they present.

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