“All that Jazz!” The Musical Hum of Business

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Abstract

This document connects music and business. Specifically, improvisation within a jazz band is described in great detail and then applied to business situations to show how it can be used as a tool within organizations to manage the unpredictability of the global macroenvironment. A comprehensive list of organizational and individual requirements is given to show employees which general personal and team-based attributes, entrepreneurial characteristics, and learning and process skills they need to develop and/or strengthen in order to contribute most effectively to individual or team-based improvisation in the workplace. The role that procedural and declarative memory play in the improvisation process is also discussed. Risks as well as rewards of improvisation are outlined to give employees a realistic perspective on improvisation so that they can decide for themselves when would be the best time to employ it in their organization. The best organizational structures for improvisation are explored. An analysis of the similarities between improvisation and strategy implementation will make clear how organizations can implement their corporate strategies by improvising. Next, a case study of Ford Motor Company at the end of this document demonstrates how the company has modeled and set the stage for improvisation in the workplace, via its phenomenal Leadership and Corporate Citizenship Council. Finally, a personal dimension based upon my own experiences with jazz piano lessons and improvisation practice is integrated throughout the document to add an experiential aspect to the paper.
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Introduction to Today’s Global Business Environment

Change is the only constant. Businesses today are inundated with many ways to change so that they can keep up with their constantly changing global macroenvironment. This fact corresponds to the chaos theory which states that dynamic and complex environments like that of large companies are inherently unpredictable (Crossan et al. 3). Managers and companies alike have to be nimble and flexible because the competition is changing all of the time (Moorman & Miner 2). This is referred to as hypercompetition, which is the rapid change of technology, shift in consumer tastes, new product development, and something I term as new idea development, or NID—a driver of competition for companies to see who can implement the best business ideas.

C.K. Prahalad, Professor of Corporate Strategy at the University of Michigan, states that companies, to keep up with the changes, must forget what they have already learned and re-learn new ways of doing business (Prahalad). Consequently, many firms hire consultants to help them with internal changes such as streamlining business processes, updating computer information systems, and increasing communication flow throughout different functional departments.

I am going to expound upon a technique that, if employed by companies in their day-to-day business operations, may ensure their success in the ever-changing global marketplace. That technique is called improvisation. Specifically, I will analyze how jazz musicians improvise within a jazz band and from my analysis draw key ideas about the jazz metaphor and how it can be applied to business. I will provide an in-depth analysis of jazz improvisation and give a detailed explanation of its function in a jazz band and all that the improvisational process entails. My analysis will answer the following research question: how and to what degree can organizations use jazz improvisational techniques to enhance their performance in the
competitive marketplace? My analysis will revolve around the prerequisites for successful improvisation and the types of organizational structures that best facilitate it. In addition, I will also show how improvisation helps companies implement their corporate strategies. Consequently, my research should demonstrate that improvising organizations have more potential for successfully managing the constant changes of the competitive marketplace.

Throughout the paper I will also add personal insights from my experience in taking jazz piano lessons this semester to better illustrate certain points of improvisation. Finally, I will supplement my research with a case study of Ford Motor Company and the role improvisation has in its work environment.

**Creativity in the Workplace**

Ease of access has made the creative use of information more important. Our society is inundated with information from a variety of sources: the Internet, television, newspaper, radio, telephone, videoconferences, etc. It is likely that most people in the world will be able to gain access to this information in some way or another. This implies that all businesses will have access to the same information. The more information firms have, the more efficient the market will be. What will separate successful companies from unsuccessful companies is their use of this information (Kao 4). As a result, companies need to learn to be creative with the information that they receive. Hence, we are entering a new age, called the “Age of Creativity” (Kao 4). As the Information Age comes to an end, people must think of new ways to do things. Managers must be managers of creativity, helping employees learn to prioritize in order of importance the resources they need when making business decisions. Many times these
resources are limited, so managers and employees must be creative with what they have on hand and learn how to improvise.

**Application of the Jazz Metaphor**

Improvisation is the key component of creativity in the workplace. Lawrence Wilkinson, President of the Global Business Network, believes that improvisation, or the ability to improvise, will be *the* key business skill of this decade (Lawrence Wilkinson qtd. in Kao xvii). To understand how improvisation is directly related to business, I will use the jazz metaphor. First, I would like to point out the value of using a metaphor to understand organizational business constructs. A metaphor works with an individual’s emotional capabilities and total imagination (Hatch 2). It also helps people draw similarities between two things that are commonly perceived as very different. To explain, a metaphor encourages people, who are disposed to thinking in a particular way, understand something new that they would not have otherwise understood because it involved thinking in a way foreign to their psyche. Thus, a metaphor helps people understand the unfamiliar by comparing it to the familiar (Hatch 2). For example, business people can understand how to improvise like jazz musicians do in a jazz band when it is explained to them using business terms in a business setting. This approach to understanding organizations better through an unfamiliar topic corresponds to post-modern organization theory, where paradoxical structures make up its emerging vocabulary (Hatch 2).

**Jazz Music and its Relation to Creativity in the Workplace**

Scholars focus on jazz as the best way to explain creativity in the workplace because it expresses creativity in ways similar to business. For example, jazz is a process: one can observe,
analyze, understand, replicate, teach, and even manage it (Kao xix). The latter is the same for businesses. Furthermore, jazz musicians express creativity through free expression, disciplined self-control, and solitude in a crowded room (Kao xix). The latter is particularly apropos of a business setting because businesses are constantly “in a crowded room,” meaning they are surrounded by people working within the business and interacting with it from the outside. It is imperative that businesses maintain self-disciplined control so that they can have a perceived sense of control over their macroenvironment. Learning how to improvise gives businesses a perceived sense of control over their situation because it helps manage uncertainty. By improvising, businesses will have at least one skill that they can use to cope with their ever-changing micro and macroenvironment.

Jazz musicians operate so effectively because they have the liberty to be creative with the notes that they play. Likewise, employees work best when they have the freedom to carry out their responsibilities in a way unique to their own work style, thus giving them the feeling that they are playing instead of working (Kao 13). Jazz also teaches people in business about practice and performance. Leadership is yet another jazz and business application. Individuals and groups have different leadership roles that they can learn from jazz musicians who practice rotating leadership (Crossan, et al. 6). All in all, by learning how to improvise, businesses not only learn about the world of jazz but also come to understand their own organizations better.

Of all of the musical genres, jazz is the most flexible and responsive to environmental changes, in much the same the way each musician plays his or her own instrument. Today, everyone talks about the need for flatter business structures in order to promote flexibility and adaptability in the workplace; consequently, using the jazz metaphor to describe today’s changing organization is a perfect fit. Like a business, jazz is structured and must be disciplined;
but, it cannot be driven by formulas, agendas, and sheet music. It can only be organized that way. In reality, jazz is structured as much as it can be to allow maximum flexibility for improvisation (Barrett & Peplowski 559). A little order goes a long way in jazz (Weick, *Aesthetic of Imperfection* 9). Jazz improvising is spur-of-the-moment composing. Entropy is jazz’s normal state—there is no return through the way you came in (i.e. how you first started playing the song) when you play jazz (Weick, *Aesthetic of Imperfection* 8).

I have just touched on the subject of jazz improvisation. However, to understand the jazz metaphor and how it can be applied to business, it is essential that one fully comprehend the meaning of improvisation before analyzing the improvisational process in a jazz band and in a business. I will now go into an in-depth explanation of jazz improvisation.

**Definition of Improvisation**

I have come across many different definitions of improvisation. I will start out with my own definition, which I “improvised” using the information gathered from my literary research, jazz piano practice, and visits to the Bird of Paradise, a local Ann Arbor jazz club. Improvisation is the process of creating something new, while sub-conscious thoughts derived from past experiences, disposition of character, and local conditions simultaneously motivate and create the new actions. I derived much of my definition from the term *idiosyncratic guidance*, which identifies past experiences, disposition, and knowledge of local conditions as important factors for successful improvisation (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 545). As the improvisation process unfolds, idiosyncratic guidance informs a person what to do. Improvisers can use their knowledge gained from immediate hindsight—that is, they can use what they just played or did—to determine what musical phrase, or business decision, would next sound good or make
good business sense (Weick, *Aesthetic of Imperfection* 12). Immediate hindsight is considered a “past experience,” corresponding to *idiosyncratic guidance’s* definition.

Next a more scholarly definition of improvisation: “[Improvisation is]… re-working pre-composed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance; thereby adding unique features to every creation” (Paul Berliner qtd. in Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 544). Jazz improvisation has a lot to do with bricolage, a term used by many different authors that essentially means making do with the resources that you have on hand at the current time (Cunha, et al. 12). Examples are material, cognitive, affective, and social resources (Cunha, et al. 7). (See pages 31-32 of this document for a complete description of resources).

Next, collective improvisation is the outcome of individuals improvising together (Moorman & Miner 5). Collective improvising is interesting because its outcome is different from the combination of individual results of when the same number of people improvise by themselves. I term this phenomenon improvisational synergy or synergistic improvisation. For example, the outcome of five people who are collectively improvising is different from what it would be if the same five people were improvising by themselves and then their individual results were combined.

It is important to remember that group improvisation is only as good as its “weakest improviser.” The latter is derived from the cliché that “a group is only as strong as its weakest link.” I view business teams as a chain because everyone is connected by a common goal and each person, or link, has a particular responsibility to carry out. Someone who does not fulfill his or her duties will still be supported by other group members since everyone is connected via the chain. But, the chain will be weakened because the people who support the “weak link” will not
be able to put as much effort into their own responsibilities, thus making the overall group output less strong. This is why it is crucial that each individual learn how to improvise as best as he or she can to make their group’s collective output strong.

Corresponding to post-modern organizational theory’s emerging vocabulary of paradoxes, jazz improvisation sets the following contents in tension with each other: tradition and the new; structure and openness; norms and standards and experimentation; familiarity and uncertainty, achieving group goals and meeting individual goals of expression; discipline and freedom; power and desire; post-modern organizational theory and consistent experimentation; and finally, expertise and naiveté (Kao 32). The unique combination of paradoxes that exist in jazz improvisation preserves individual identity, diversity of ideas and people, and autonomy of the group and individuals that participate in the improvisation process (Weick, Aesthetic of Imperfection 7).

Furthermore, because most improvisation in a jazz band and in a business occurs within a team of people, it must be built on a consensus in tandem with autonomy—another paradox (Weick, Aesthetic of Imperfection 9). It is hard to think of something in life that occurs naturally in consensus in tandem with autonomy. One example could be a situation where everyone plays at the same time yet there is a voluntary consensus to acknowledge and reveal everyone’s identity. For instance, in team sports such as soccer and basketball, people have certain talents that are made known to the whole team. A person with good shooting skills may be singled out during a game by having the ball passed to them in order to shoot the winning basket. The rest of the team helps to exhibit that person’s uniqueness at the time the basket is shot, while at the same time a voluntary consensus to win and to play together still exists among everyone.
Likewise, in a jazz band, there is no division of labor, just everyone trying their best to add value to the novel creation of the jazz song (Weick, *Aesthetic of Imperfection* 12).

**The Jazz Band’s Performance**

This section covers all aspects of the jazz band’s performance by analyzing jazz tunes and their structures, the rotating roles of musicians, and different styles of jazz music. First, a jazz band combines people, instruments, and sheet music to perform jazz music. The song that the jazz band creates is a result of improvisation. The sound that results is influenced not only by the sheet music, musicians, and instruments, but also by each musicians’ approach to the musical score, any pre-composed material, and the audience (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 549). Therefore, each song performed by a jazz band is unique to the people who are performing, the instruments that they play, and the melody from which they are improvising. Drawing from Paul Berliner’s definition of improvisation, the “unanticipated ideas” are those alterations to the melody that occur during the performance as a result of everyone’s music playing being influenced by everyone else’s.

Next, in the words of Charles Mingus, world-renowned bassist-composer, “You can’t improvise on nothing; you’ve gotta improvise on something” (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 546). Improvisation always works with a melody, or “pre-composed material,” that jazz musicians choose to play at a particular tempo. The jazz song starts with a head, which is the basic melody that musicians improvise. The melody dictates to musicians from what chord structure they will play notes (Moorman & Miner 4). The beginning of an improvised song is crucial because it sets the tone for the rest of the musical piece (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 546). What occurs at the beginning is generally embellished throughout the rest of the song and
transformed into something altogether new by the musicians who are playing it. In essence, jazz is like an independent thought that converges at the beginning from a central starting point (Peplowski 561).

Second, the jazz song is made up of notes, bars, phrases, and sections. Jazz musicians know all of the notes in the corresponding scale of a chord. Usually musicians will play what is referred to as the II, IV, I chord sequence. The “two, five, one” as it is pronounced, represents three chord changes that contain the notes from the same key signature; as a result, the combination of chords sounds pleasing to the ear. A song’s key signature defines which scale underlies the main melody of the song, or which series of notes are used within the key signature that can be played as flats or sharps. For example, the key (signature) of B flat has two flats, B and E. Whenever the song shows either the B or E note to be played in the sheet music, the musician knows to play them flat even though the flat symbol is not written on the sheet music. When notes not in the key signature scale are supposed to be played either flat or sharp, they will be denoted with a symbol that signals the musician to play them in that way.

Next, the variation of chord changes is called chorus phrasing (Moorman & Miner 4). Chord changes, or chord sequences, are like directions for musicians. It tells them which way to go, just like a map tells a driver whether to go North, East, South, or West. You play the chords as depicted by the sheet music and voice, or interpret, them in a certain way. Musicians know that although they can voice the chords however they want, they must play selected notes from the scales that correspond to that particular chord. Otherwise, they would not be playing the same chord and it would not sound as pleasing to the ear (Barrett and Peplowski 558).

Because jazz musicians voice the chords and notes that they see in front of them in a way unique to their own playing style, everyone ends up playing his or her notes based upon what
others are playing. The end result is something altogether new that could not have been predicted from the onset of the musical song. The improvised melody will have new patterns “unrelated to original harmonic, rhythmic, or melodic structures” (Moorman & Miner 4). In a jazz band, individuals and groups practice to master scales and drills and to strengthen their dexterity (Crossan, et al. 9). Their practice is unstructured to foster group cooperation. Still, each musician will interpret the song as they want to (Hatch 10).

Next, there are four roles that jazz musicians alternate playing during a song. They are soloing, comping, aiding, and fours. Soloing is similar to playing the lead: you improvise with your instrument while everybody else partakes in comping or aiding. Comping is accompanying the person who is soloing and aiding is providing rhythmic background and/or harmonic support (Hatch 4). I have witnessed the interaction among jazz musicians at the Bird of Paradise, and they are very supportive of each other’s playing. They make eye contact with each other and really get into the “groove” when they play their music. Finally, “fours” is when jazz musicians take turns playing four bar solos, or a musical phrase that lasts for four counts, one right after the other and as a result create a very diverse, rapid, and multi-faceted approach to and expression of the music (Hatch 4). This information has led me to discover yet another paradox of jazz improvisation—playing something that is new, unplanned, and inconsistent at the same time someone else plays something planned and consistent. The jazz musician who is soloing improvises and creates something new, unplanned, and inconsistent while other jazz musicians comp and alternate between routine rhythms that are planned and consistent.

As a result of improvisation within its musical genre, jazz styles have given way to new forms of jazz over the years. From the 1930s to 1960s, most songs were made up of the II, V, I chordal sequences (Barrett and Peplowski 558). Since the 1950s, the be-bop style of jazz
emerged and chord transgressions started to include notes that were not in the original key signature.

**Four Degrees of Improvisation**

Improvisation is a continual process that ranges along four degrees: interpretation, embellishment, variation, and improvisation (Lee Konitz cited in Berliner qtd. in Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 544). The improvisational intensity of the degree depends upon how much it builds upon the original melody. Interpretation involves taking minor liberties with the melody, embellishment takes whole phrases and delays them beyond their usual placement, variation incorporates clusters of notes into the song not in the original melody but still makes clear a relationship to the melody, and finally true improvisation creates an altogether new melody consisting of patterns that bear little or no resemblance to the original melody but that may have been created from combing patterns of the original melody in a unique way (Berliner qtd. in Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 545). Whenever I completely improvise within a song I always come back to the original melody at some point, even if it is at the very end of the musical piece.

Interpretation and embellishment are easier to do because they do not take as much time. They depend more upon the original musical score, or substantive framework of the organization. Therefore, interpretation and embellishment within an organization are easy to initiate due to the level of familiarity with the original model. This has negative side effects and leads to a decreasing adaptation rate to corporate strategic changes that differ from the norm. On the other hand, variation and improvisation depend less on the original model and more on idiosyncratic guidance. As a result, full spectrum improvisation is ideal because it incorporates
all four degrees of improvisation and “makes fuller use of memory and past experience, can build upon the competencies of a more diverse population, is more focused by a melody, and may be more coherent” (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 545). As a result, these activities are more often widely accepted among employees at a faster rate since everyone can understand how they developed. Moreover, Karl Weick claims that actions that incorporate all four gradations of improvisation are apt to be more persuasive and easier for people to understand (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 545).

**Improvisation Characteristics and Requirements**

**Characterizing Improvisation**

This section explores the characteristics that make improvisation unique and the prerequisites for it to be effective in organizations. Three characteristics brand jazz improvisation. First, it is an emergent process. Improvisation is extemporaneous; people cannot plan for it. Therefore, the process evolves as everyone participates in creating a novel idea, product, service, or song. Secondly, improvisation is deliberate. Jazz musicians know they will improvise when playing a jazz song—*improvisation* is what makes jazz, *jazz*! Companies realize that they have to improvise when they are stuck in a rut and are under pressure to create something new. Third, improvisation is temporal. There is an extremely small gap between the design and execution of action (Moorman & Miner 4). In order to determine how much something has been improvised or is being improvised, it is necessary to determine how much design and execution have converged in time (Moorman & Miner 3). Improvisation is a continual process rather than sporadic. As execution and composition converge in time, they become one and cannot be separated and continue on as long as improvisation lasts. To
understand improvisation better, it is necessary to focus on when it occurs, rather than whether it actually occurs at all (Moorman & Miner 3).

Organizational Characteristics

Certain business characteristics also increase the potential for improvisation to be effective within a firm. Businesses must create a culture that embraces different ideas and rewards creativity and risk-taking so that people will feel comfortable sharing their own creative thoughts (Kao xiv). This is because people may develop ideas that are different from the business culture’s norm due to their own perspective, generated from unique past experiences and knowledge of the current and future business situation. These ideas may be abstract, concrete, or an interpretation of previous ideas. Still, they are all important and everyone must take an active part in listening to each other’s ideas so that a true solution may be realized that combines everyone’s best ideas. Creating a secure environment will help counterbalance the risks involved with improvisation (Cunha, et al. 37).

Second, teamwork is an integral component to business and therefore much improvisation occurs within teams. Improvising teams in organizations should be talented, diverse, and flexible. The more diverse the group the more varied the ideas are that people generate, which all adds up to the creation of something novel. Also, the smaller the size of the group, the more effective improvisation will be (Cunha, et al. 38). Moreover, it is essential that a group agrees to tolerate uncertainty when faced with situations where they do not know the outcome (Cunha, et al. 33-4).

Two more factors facilitate the effective use of improvisation in the workplace. First, an organization must have superb information flow so that people are aware of the improvisational processes that are going on and how events are perceived throughout the organization (Cunha, et
al. 35). Second, organizations that are more in tune with their employees’ level of commitment, the current internal and external business situations, and their business’ historical performance in the marketplace, will be more apt to improvise successfully.

Again, improvising businesses and jazz bands alike should have the minimum structure possible for maximum flexibility in order to be capable of quickly making up for their mistakes (see pages 41-47 for detailed information regarding best organizational structures for improvisation). Ken Peplowski, a renowned saxophonist and clarinetist who has played with the Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman bands, (Meyer, et al. 540) said that, “You are only a half-step away from salvation” (Barrett & Peplowski 560). This is a reassuring statement because it means that no matter if musicians make mistakes, they can quickly rectify them because they are only a “half-step,” which is the smallest distance between notes on any instrument and therefore takes little time to play, away from salvation. For example, if musicians purposefully or accidentally play notes that are not in the song’s written chord structure, they can make it sound good by playing additional notes that are in corresponding scales such as the aeonian, harmonic, or the tonic (Barrett & Peplowski 561). Inserting notes from other corresponding scales is like bringing different ideas into a company’s mainstream strategy (Kao 38).

This idea of salvation can be applied to businesses in the following way: what further separates the good companies from the bad companies is how they cover for their mistakes. If they admit to their fault and take responsibility for their actions immediately, businesses can gain more respect among their stakeholders than if they had lied about a crisis situation. For example, an immediate apology note and a monetary refund can correct bad customer service. Or, if the mistake occurs during a manufacturing process like that of the cyanide that entered some of Johnson & Johnson’s extra-strength Tylenol capsules several years ago, a company’s immediate
action can save its reputation. For example, Johnson & Johnson instantly recalled all of its thirty-one million extra-strength Tylenol bottles on store shelves, costing the company $100 million dollars. Johnson & Johnson improvised because they worked under time pressure and used existing resources in order to respond immediately to the crisis. These examples show how companies can be “half-steps away from salvation” if they take immediate responsibility for their actions. Thankfully, there are no fatal mistakes with improvisation (Kao 36).

Mistakes support the assertion that entropy is jazz’s normal state even though it is easy to remedy mistakes that occur during improvisation. Although jazz may have a tendency towards disorder (like entropy) it also has a tendency to move the other way so that equilibrium can be achieved. In business conditions, Professor Karl Weick confirms this phenomenon by noting that indeed there is a limit to an organization’s state of entropy due to negative causal loop linkages (Weick, Organized Improvisation 243). In organizations, negative causal relationships between events impose a structure on the organization and restrict the organizational outcome by preventing overamplification of certain events (this is not to be confused with the overamplification of emergent actions that evolve while improvising as described on pages 36 and 37). To illustrate, Weick states the following: “If the quality of performance by the orchestra is tied reciprocally to the number of criticisms uttered during a rehearsal by the conductor, if more criticism leads to higher quality which leads to less criticism and lower quality, then these coupled events constitute an organized structure.” (243).

**Individual Prerequisites**

Since a group is only as strong as its weakest link, it is helpful to isolate individual characteristics that are necessary for improvising. Certain requirements exist for individuals to meet to some degree in order for an organization to reap the benefits of improvising. As jazz
musicians gain more experience, they understand improvisation in greater depth and learn the
importance of making sure that every requisite for success is met to the best of their ability. For
example, even jazz musicians who have never have played together can do so because they will
have had experience playing in numerous jazz bands and practice developing the prerequisites
for successful improvisation. For instance, Frank Barrett (scholar/pianist) and Ken Peplowski
were able to play a rendition of the song “All of Me” together at the Vancouver Jazz Symposium
in 1998 even though it was their first time playing together (Barrett & Peplowski 558-560). This
shows how jazz musicians have a lot of leeway to play with any other musicians because they all
know how to improvise and are thus immediately on the same wavelength. That is the beauty of
improvisation, it connects people who understand the process and allows people from different
backgrounds to work together successfully to achieve a common goal, whether it be a strong
performance of John Coltrane’s “Baby C” or the development of a new microchip.

COMPREHENSIVE REQUIREMENT LIST

I have developed a comprehensive list of requirements that I deem are the most important
for a company’s employees or a jazz band’s musicians to fulfill when they explore the art of
improvising:

General Personal Attributes

These are general attributes that individuals within organizations should possess in order
for improvisation to be successful within an organization.

Talent: It is imperative that professionals have the technical, managerial, and industry know-
how of the business in which they are improvising (Crossan et al. 9). This will enable them to
identify the resources that they have on hand as potential business opportunities. C.K. Prahalad
confirms this statement by saying that an organization must have talented individuals to
improvise successfully (Prahalad). My own personal experience has taught me how important
multi-faceted talent is. Even though I have had 16 years of piano experience and have developed
good technique, I did not know how to truly improvise in jazz because I did not have the
knowledge of piano theory, which defines key signatures, various scales, chord structures, etc. It
should be cautioned that people who depend only on their technique are going to have a hard
time improvising since it requires different types of knowledge (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552).

**Ability to Concentrate:** People need to use the power of concentration that enables them to focus on the tasks at hand to achieve their goals. When they improvise, it is important that people do not become distracted by past memories and anticipation of future outcomes (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552).

**Confidence:** Being confident helps employees feel comfortable when they stray from their normal business routine when improvising (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552). In a way, improvising is like “getting lost with confidence” (Quinn 12). Ken Peplowski, a jazz musician who participated in the Vancouver Jazz Symposium in 1998—a conference that brought together world leaders in the organizational development field such as University of Michigan Business School’s Karl Weick—comments on the importance of confidence when performing. He claims that an individual should exude confidence even if they have to *fake* it, while improvising. He coins this “false psyche,” emphasizing that improvisation is a mental process. Peplowski even goes so far as to say that an individual knows when they are truly doing their best if they are relaxed when they improvise (Peplowski 561). However, this may be difficult for employees who are under pressure to get their job done in a certain amount of time. I propose that businesses will become more confident when improvising as they gain more experience doing it.

**Commitment:** Just as jazz artists are committed to play with other musicians and to play a certain musical piece and instrument (Weick, *Organized Improvisation* 246), employees need to be committed to improvising and believe that the rewards are well worth their efforts (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552).

**Intuitiveness:** Dealing with uncertainty, time pressures, and limited resources, improvisers need todepend upon their intuition. That way they can make choices without the formal analysis that can be such a lengthy process in the business world (Crossan and Sorrenti qtd. in Moorman & Miner 6). Strong intuition can be developed from studying, listening, and practicing what you are improvising—be it a song or a strategic plan in the marketplace (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 544).

**Team-Based Attributes**

*Individuals that improvise together on teams must exhibit the following personal characteristics in order for improvisation within teams to be effective.*

**Trust:** People must trust each other in an organization. This provides a secure environment and facilitates productive teamwork. True improvisation does not guarantee the four Cs: confidence, comfort, consistency, or competency (Crossan, et al. 15). As a result, people must trust each other with their feelings and emotions that may concur with the uncertainty improvisation brings about.

**Respect:** A mutually respecting environment logically goes along with trust because people need to respect each other’s feelings.
**Collaboration:** People must learn to collaborate with one another. It is essential that everyone is kept abreast of what others are doing when teams improvise. By observing the actions of your team members, you can help set the stage for them to improvise by “comping,” or providing them a rhythmic background. In business terms, comping occurs when team members periodically report on certain issues to one person in the group who then uses that information to improvise.

### Entrepreneurial Characteristics

**Employees in an improvising organization exhibit the following entrepreneurial characteristics.**

**Extemporaneous Acting:** Improvisation itself is not planned and therefore people must act extempore instead of basing their actions on a pre-planned strategy (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552).

**Tolerance for Change:** People need to be able to tolerate change because improvisation is in itself a changing act and its outcome can never be predicted (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552).

**Initiative:** People need to take the initiative to come up with new ideas and take risks.

**Flexibility:** Employees must be flexible enough to adapt to new and changing situations and external forces (i.e. the market). Again, jazz is known as having the minimum structure for maximum flexibility (Barrett 606).

**Planning:** People must plan out how they will achieve their short and long-term goals. Planning provides a framework for people from which to improvise. According to Crossan and her co-authors, a combination of planning and improvisation make an organization successful (Crossan, et al. 4). It is helpful to have an existing set of meaningful corporate values that a company can embellish when they start to improvise. You cannot plan when to improvise but you can improvise what you have planned (Mintzberg & McHugh qtd. in Cunha, et al. 23).

### Learning Skills

**The following skills are what students employ throughout their entire education to achieve academic excellence. The same skills apply to achieve improvisational excellence.**

**Quick Learning:** Improvisation occurs when there is a demand for speedy action. As a result, employees need to be able to learn quickly what it is that they have to do to improvise with the resources that are on hand. Sometimes this involves re-learning how to do particular business functions or processes to keep up with the changes in the macroenvironment. Again, C.K. Prahalad supports this notion by stating that many times businesses will have to re-learn how to do things (Prahalad). I have experienced the re-learning process in my jazz piano lessons because I am learning all new chord structures and chorus phrasings that I have never learned before in thirteen years of piano lessons. Another note on quick learning—the more organizations improvise the more it helps them to learn quickly. This holds true for highly competitive environments (Cunha, et al. 18).
**Studying:** Improvisation involves intense studying to acquire knowledge of the resources used in improvisation that are available within the internal and external environment. A firm must have an in-depth knowledge of material, cognitive, affective, and social resources at all times (Cunha, et al. 12). Again, please see pages 31 and 32 for detailed descriptions of the various resources.

**Practice:** Just like learning how to do math problems is made easier by practicing how to do them, organizations can learn how to improvise if they practice. Striking a balance between the use of both idiosyncratic guidance and unstructured ingenuity—something made up on the spot—takes time. Still, practice is invaluable and the best form of risk management (Kao 54). Practice also develops the process skills of listening, communication, coaching, and time management that are so important for improvisation (Crossan et al. 9). Some right-brained exercises for practicing how to improvise can be found in the “Business Settings” division of this document on page 30.

**Process Skills**

**Employees must develop these skills in addition to the skills of their trade in order to improvise successfully.** Quality application of these skills also helps develop effective managers in improvisational business settings.

**Listening:** Individuals must also listen intensely to the voices heard around them while improvising. It is imperative that corporations do not allow titles and department politics interfere with giving people an equal say in how they should improvise (Peplowski 560).

**Communication:** Clear communication is an integral part of improvisation. There should not be a problem if people interpret what the other person is saying exactly as the person meant to convey it. Because improvisation is so dependent on the interdependence of all its participants, a company’s ability to communicate is one of the most major factors of its success.

**Coaching:** Coaching can be done by all members of a group, or by just the leader. Coaching helps people stay motivated when they are improvising and reminds them of its rewards.

**Time management:** Improvisation occurs under a time crunch when people feel the pressure to perform and create a new product or service. Therefore, they must manage their time well to create as stress-free of an environment as possible.

**Temporal Qualifications**

**Employees within an organization need to understand how time affects improvisation so that they can improvise effectively in a timely manner.**

**Consistency:** It is important that everyone keeps pace with each other to maintain a consistent work speed (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 552). Declaring a constant tempo of how fast people should work is one of the ways that organizations can manage improvisation without letting it get out of hand. For example, when I improvise on the piano I have to maintain the written tempo of the song in order for my playing to flow and sound coherent.
**Time:** Improvisation takes TIME to learn so that it can be executed in an instant when it is really needed. The timeliness factor is something that musicians and business people must accept, albeit it is a bit frustrating in this rapidly-changing world. My own experience has taught me that a beneficial way to practice the piano is to play both hands separately in order to really study the notes each hand is playing. Once I become good at the right and left-hand parts separately, I can bring them together and play the song with both hands. It is important to note that I have to start out slow at first, just as one starts out slow when first learning to improvise, but as I continue to practice I get faster while still maintaining quality in my playing.

**Improvisation and Memory**

In addition to a successful combination of the above requirements, an organization makes use of its procedural and declarative memory when it improvises. The right combination of memory enhances an organization’s effectiveness. As a result, accumulating strong memory is very important (Moorman & Miner 2). Declarative memory is factual knowledge. In business, declarative memory is information that companies have about competitors, dominant market traits, and strategic groups, among other industry data (Moorman & Miner 7). Jazz musicians have high declarative memory when it comes to theoretical knowledge of chord structure and musical scales.

On the other hand, procedural memory directs how skills and routines are carried out (Moorman & Miner 9). A business’ procedural memory is its knowledge of standard business practices that it has always used. It consists of the customary skills and routines that have been employed in the industry (Moorman & Miner 9). As a result, a company’s development of procedural memory depends on its micro and macroenvironment. A jazz band’s procedural memory is the knowledge of different chord transgressions musicians may follow during a particular song.

Jazz musicians’ declarative memory stores are full of knowledge about chord progression theories and rhythmic patterns such as swing and bebop (Moorman & Miner 11). For example,
my jazz piano lessons have taught me that when I see the chord B7 (pronounced B dominant seven) written on sheet music, I know to play the following notes: B, D sharp, F sharp, and A, using the 5th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st finger of my left hand. These are facts that no jazz musician would deny. Declarative memory also guides musicians to vary their chorus phrasings. For example, one could play the notes of the B7 chord in the following order: A, B, D sharp, and F sharp, using the 5th, 4th, 2nd, and 1st fingers of the left hand. This would not change the meaning of the chord but rather would give it a little different sound since the notes are played in a different order.

A higher declarative memory may result in the following: 1) Increased chances that improvisation will produce higher coherent action since general knowledge can be applied in many different situations; 2) Increased chances for producing novel action; and 3) Incomplete application during improvisation (Moorman & Miner 12). The latter outcome may ensue because sometimes there is too much information and it becomes difficult to isolate the most important facts. Furthermore, declarative memory may cause a company to depend too much upon the facts, rather than what they know intuitively from common sense and everyday business knowledge (Moorman & Miner 13). I believe that the more companies practice improvising, the more likely they will be able to distinguish among important facts stored in their declarative memory and prioritize the existing resources on hand to improvise well. Likewise, I believe that good jazz musicians can avoid this negative outcome through more experiences with improvising and knowing what chord transgressions and rhythmic patterns would sound good with certain songs.

Next, a strong procedural memory is automatic, constantly accessible, and contains a rich vocabulary (Moorman & Miner 9). Because it is knowledge of routines, people can develop
large repertoires for potential actions of what to do when encountering a situation that necessitates improvisation. For example, throughout sixteen years of piano playing, I have a high procedural memory of improvisational techniques to employ. When I play a song where limited notes for the right and left hand are given, I can alternate between myriad jazz conventions such as chord transgressions, boogie woogie, and walking bass lines in my left hand. In my right hand, I can “vary” the music by inserting trills and grace notes to supplement the melody.

Next, a high procedural memory influences improvisation within an organization in a variety of ways. According to Moorman & Miner a higher procedural memory can do the following: 1) increase coherency of improvisation—everybody is already familiar with pre-existing routines and would be able to do them in order to achieve an all together new result; 2) increase speed of improvisation because of the automatic memory; and, 3) increase the chance for improvisation producing an outcome low in novelty (Moorman & Miner 10). The last outcome can result because some people may have a tendency to act out pre-existing routines instead of using them as models from which to improvise. Companies, which have numerous routines that they can call upon that they know are effective in certain business situations, have a hard time trying something new when their environment changes because they will not know if it will be as successful as past routines (Moorman & Miner 10). Firms that have high procedural memory may also repeat past strategic moves because they do not want to deviate from routines that they have “over-learned” and thus spent so much time learning (Moorman & Miner 11).

In jazz, some musicians who do not know enough about improvisation or are scared to experiment with different rhythmic patterns or jazz conventions either have low procedural memory or lack the confidence to improvise. Either situation can cause problems. Charles
Mingus once almost reduced a young and aspiring saxophonist to tears before a live audience when he belittled him by saying, “Play something different, man; play something different. This is jazz, man. You played that last night and the night before” (Berliner qtd. in Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 546). This comment made by Mingus demonstrates how essential it is not only to improvise, but also to keep the improvisations “fresh” in jazz (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 546).

I still believe that the procedural memory can be high if jazz musicians and firms are confident enough to move away from what they know will work and what they have played before, and create something altogether new. If a company has a low procedural memory, that means that they do not have a set number of routines that they follow when they are pressed for time. As a result, they have more pressure to improvise and create new routines that are not variations of old routines stored in the organization’s procedural memory (Cunha, et al. 30).

Procedural and declarative memory work together. The unique combination of an organization’s procedural and declarative memory influences its success with improvisation. If effectively combined, both types of memory can increase the novelty, speed, and coherency of improvised action (Moorman & Miner 14). Declarative memory is similar to the mechanics of the principles that underlie procedural memory (Moorman & Miner 11), and it may therefore guide the creative use of procedural memory (Moorman & Miner 13). Jazz musicians make effective use of their procedural and declarative memory by knowing which chord transgressions and rhythmic patterns would sound good together in a particular song.

The key to finding the most effective combination of declarative and procedural memory is being able to call upon all of this information quickly. In a business setting, a firm can creatively combine their factual knowledge into new routines that translates into procedural
memory, thus making them proactive towards change (Moorman & Miner 13). They can do this by creating an environment that facilitates open communication among employees. For example, open office spaces can allow employees to readily share information with each other about the market and industry and come up with new ways to react and respond to the changes. New ways to respond and react are part of the firm’s procedural memory. This information on market information—declarative memory components—can be accessed quickly within a firm if it has Intranet systems with sophisticated search engines that look up data (Moorman & Miner 14). Moreover, the skills that are strengthened with an established procedural memory can be added to declarative memory stores, which the organization can retrieve when they need to know what they are good at doing (Moorman & Miner 14).

**Business Settings for Improvisation**

Improvisation in companies happens when there is a demand for speed and action, as when the organization does not have a plan for the unexpected event and must take advantage of the resources that it has on hand and turn them into capabilities (Cunha, et al. 21). For a firm to make the effort to improvise, people must perceive the unexpected event as important to the organization’s success in the marketplace. This makes clear that an organization’s perceived sense of control is very important to it and influences how much effort it will put forth towards challenges. Next, an organization has to be confident that it can handle the situation and improvise around it (Cunha, et al. 21). Again, an organization will have more success with improvisation the more confident it is about its capabilities to improvise.

Improvisation usually occurs at a high speed as well since companies feel pressure to create something novel using the resources that they have on hand. I have experienced this when
I am playing jazz piano. I have to keep up with the tempo of the song even if I do not know how to play all of the notes. As a result, I start to improvise the notes that I do not know how to play in order to keep up with the song’s tempo. I try to keep my notes as close to the melody as possible because I know that this will sound more pleasing to the ear. I do this by making sure I play notes in the corresponding scales of the written chords; thus, I try to interpret and embellish the melody rather than truly improvise. The fact that I still have particular notes that I am trying to play demonstrates how jazz music is still structured. But if I truly improvise a part of a song, my own notes will probably have nothing to do with the melody and I will be playing notes not in the corresponding scales of the written chords. While consistently trying to keep up with the song’s tempo and improvising, I learn how to be creative with the notes (i.e., resources) that I have on hand and as a result learn how to improvise.

Next, improvisation takes place when there is a mismatch between reality—subjective or objective—and expectations. Objective reality is one that is created by a company’s environment or by chance (Cunha, et al. 23). The objective reality may be different from what an organization perceived the environmental conditions to be. As a result, a firm may change to create the environment in which they had originally expected to be operating. Part of the change may be planned; for example if a company develops a new corporate strategy that gives the company a new vision. But the emergent changes that result from the companies’ new direction may be improvised (Mintzberg & McHugh qtd. in Cunha, et al. 23).

On the other hand, subjective reality is enacted by an organization’s members in accordance with social constructs evident within the company (Cunha, et al. 24). Employees create their own environmental conditions that are different from those that they perceive prevail (Cunha, et al. 24). As a result, they alter their enacted environment to create another one that
better matches their original environmental expectations (Cunha, et al. 24). Personally, I believe that a subjective reality leads to more improvising because people create their own environment and in so doing they improvise!

Managers who improvise do so more often when their environment is complex and difficult to simplify (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 549). An organization can make improvisation easier by setting aside time for doing exercises in the workplace that tap into the right-brain capabilities of employees (Crossan et al.14). For example, nonsense naming is one exercise where an employee simultaneously points at one object and has to identify it without using its proper name. Another exercise called dubbing has two people act out that which two other people tell them to do. This exercise teaches people how to coordinate their actions with each other. Two people each receive directions from an external voice while the other two people give directions to the two bodies (Crossan, et al. 13). Both of these exercises show how everyone can learn to improvise through practice exercises.

**The Company’s Performance**

This section will focus on the many similarities that exist between the make-up of a jazz band and the make-up of a company. The key similarity is the improvisational process that both undergo to enhance their respective performances. A company combines people, technology, and processes to create a final product or service. A business’ strategy can be thought of as the musical theme, the employees are the musicians, the assets are the instruments, and the customers are the audience (Crossan, et al.10). A company’s performance is the sale of their product or service.
I am going to revert back to Lee Konick’s definition of improvisation to draw out more similarities between improvisation in a business and improvisation in a jazz band (see pages 5 and 6). First, “special conditions” exist within the business market that influence how well a company performs, or sells their product/service. For example, Michael Porter’s five forces influence a company’s success in a particular market. Next, “unanticipated ideas” are part of what I term “New Idea Development.” People generate these ideas as a result of changing market forces. Therefore, they could not be created without a company interacting with other players in the market. The new ideas are shaped during day-to-day business transactions.

In a sense, improvisation helps organizations reinvent themselves because they are creating something altogether new. Improvising businesses have to re-learn how they go about doing business and thus will need time to practice their new business processes. Again, practice is an integral requirement for successful improvisation. In jazz, musicians will rehearse all of the possible songs and musical phrases that they may play in a performance. When it comes down to showtime, they will improvise around what they already know during the performance (Pasmore 565). In this way, they make use of their “pre-existing resources.” Businesses should also make use of their procedural and declarative memory with the thought in mind that they could improvise from their existing routines, standard business practices, and factual knowledge at any time. Many factors contribute to a business’ overall performance in the marketplace such as its stock price and revenue.

The above demonstrates how businesses need to be constantly aware of the resources around them. Material resources are those that are tangible and lay both inside and outside of the organized system, such as financial and information systems and buildings. Cognitive resources are individuals’ mental maps which developed from their various business experiences.
Cognitive resources could also be business skills learned in the classroom (Cunha, et al. 13). Next, a multitude of emotions is involved whenever there are many people working together, and affective resources make note of them (Cunha, et al. 13). The “groove” that jazz musicians get into when they are playing extremely well with each other and are completely focused on playing good music for their audience is an example of an affective resource. For instance, a company’s groove can be in the form of a cross-functional team that just created a new product that will give the company a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Finally, social resources are social norms that result from previous interactions among co-workers such as social patterns and unspoken rules (Cunha, et al. 13)

An organization’s leadership should be servant-based and rotating. This combination of leadership positively influences the success of improvisation in the organization as well as its acceptance among employees. A servant-based leader is the formal leader of the organization or group, and he or she can facilitate the improvisational process (Cunha, et al. 32). This is because servant-leaders are capable of managing uncertainty in their environment (Crossan, et al. 11). They do this by listening to what everyone else is playing (or doing) and then react according to which direction they think the group should take next (Peplowski 561). This sets in motion another set of events that allows jazz musicians to have the flexibility to play the subsequent musical phrases as they want. This is similar to a business setting where employees have the flexibility to solve a business problem as they see fit.

A rotating leader means that everyone takes the lead at one point in time. Because improvisation is unplanned and emergent, it also makes sense that different people will emerge as leaders in times when their own experiences and skill sets make them knowledgeable about how best to improvise in a particular business situation (Cunha, et al. 32). Thus, everyone is a
leader because everyone has a “musical solo,” or their chance to make their creative ideas known to the group in which they are improvising (Peplowski 561).

It is also important for a leader to let the musical score facilitate the most positive and openly communicative interaction among employees so that an improvisational atmosphere is facilitated (Weick, Aesthetic of Imperfection 14). A leader’s constructive criticism is critical to improvising groups because it helps them perform better. This is because groups receive feedback much quicker and at a more consistent pace from their leader than traditional organizations (Voyer 75). Because improvisation is a confusing process at times, it is important for a leader(s) or people in the business to “comp,” or manage a consistent work pace so that people get adjusted to “getting lost with confidence” (Quinn 12) and dealing with the uncertainty around them (Weick, Aesthetic of Imperfection 15). As long as someone or some people are keeping tempo, people have the freedom to crossover rhythms and improvise freely with the resources they have on hand. They will always go back to the original rhythm that is being maintained (Kao 39).

A manager needs to balance out the paradoxes jazz places in tension that were mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Managers should define goals and evaluate results based on the paradoxes to give the organization a purpose. Under the guide of effective managers who help create an atmosphere of rotating and servant-based leadership, employees will soon find that improvisation is an effective way to deal with the uncertainty and manage change.

Improvisation is a process that connects the past and the present. Karl Weick, world-renowned organizational development theorist and professor at the University of Michigan, professes that in improvisation you act and then think (Weick, Improvisation Mindset 547). He states that improvisation is a retrospective action that makes sense of an organization’s
environment after it is instigated. Based on my personal experiences, I partly disagree with the latter.

For example, when I am improvising while playing the piano, I believe that I am subconsciously thinking about what particular notes I will be playing in that particular chord at the same time that I play them, reverting to my stored declarative and procedural memory. In contrast, the way I voice chords, or the distinct placement of my fingers to play the exact same notes of a specific chord, is more of an action that I do not analyze until after I have voiced the chord in a particular way. My own chorus phrasing influences the placement of my fingers as I play a chord, and thus determines how I will voice the next chord. This is because I voice a chord according to how far I have to move my fingers to play it: the shorter the finger displacement of the subsequent chord’s structure the more likely I will voice the next chord in that way. The latter describes how improvisation can be a retrospective action that makes sense of a situation after it is acted out. Many times organizations make sense of their own environment after improvising.

**Rewards of Improvisation**

Improvisation benefits companies in a variety of ways and as a result helps them obtain a greater competitive advantage in the marketplace. First, it allows companies to handle unpredictability. Second, improvisation can help companies increase their rate of learning since it is the process of making companies learn through the act of doing (Cunha, et al. 18). Managing uncertainty and learning fast benefits companies by helping them to be flexible and to take advantage of the changes in their micro and macroenvironment. It also gives firms practice making sense out of the uncertainty to make sound business decisions (Hatch 5). Consequently,
improvisation generates another reward by eliciting opportunities out of ambiguity, which produces new business thought perceptions that result in altogether new actions (Hatch 9).

When corporations take an active part in the improvisation process, they learn about themselves because it puts them more in touch with their own resources. They improvise with their existing resources and may come up with new routines and ideas that help the company’s productivity. Improvisation also increases motivation to work—and thus to improvise more—because people receive more feedback from leadership (Cunha, et al. 41). This enhances individuals’ intrinsic motivation and causes them to improvise more because they want to receive more potentially positive feedback.

Next, improvisation gives employees a feeling of transcendence and gives them the extra confidence that they need to handle any tough situation (Cunha, et al. 42). Transcendence is the feeling of “being able to tackle a problem or take advantage of an opportunity that is perceived as both important to the organization and difficult to handle by means of what is often perceived as sheer ingenuity” (Cunha, et al. 42). The feeling of transcendence, or magnificence, is enlarged when it is shared among employees and thus adds to a company’s success with improvisation. Improvisation can maximize organizational effectiveness and efficiency because it can make, what was once plain material, meaningful and important. As a whole, improvisation makes companies’ performance stronger because it makes them well suited to re-position themselves competitively in the marketplace according to the changes that are taking place (Cunha, et al. 51).
Risks of Improvisation

There are certain risks associated with improvisation. Jazz improvisation is risky because it deals with uncertainty. Other risks are biased learning, opportunity traps, increased anxiety, overamplification of emergent actions, and overuse of improvisation. First, biased learning occurs when employees generalize a solution. People may give improvised solutions more credibility than they should and as a result apply them to a broad variety of problems where the solutions may not fit (Cunha, et al. 42). In music, it is analogous to musicians who improvise something in one song and employ the same jazz conventions for another song with a completely different rhythm, key signature, or melody, thus making the overall jazz improvisation of the song sound horrible.

Second, an opportunity trap occurs when organizations do not make use of their NID—New Idea Development—that they create by improvising. When employees take too long tweaking their new ideas to be “just right,” they miss the window of opportunity in the market (Cunha, et al. 43). For instance, when making up songs on the piano, I may improvise something that sounds great; but it may take me a while to “tweak” my new creation, or to think of the perfect chord transgressions and left-hand jazz conventions to go along with it or after it. As a result, I may miss out on the window of opportunity that would open if I were to play my original composition without stopping (operative word) to think. Meaning, if I were to play without stopping, I may play additional creative phrases on the spot, based on what I had just played (i.e., using my immediate hindsight), that I would otherwise have not created if I would have stopped to think. This example demonstrates the important role subconscious thinking plays in improvisation.
A third risk is increased anxiety. Improvisers may feel pressure to deliver solutions to problems within a specified time limit. It is the presence of uncertainty that can make people feel anxious because they are not assured of the organizational outcome. Anxiety may also increase when people work together in groups for the first time and have a hard time developing a trusting work environment (Cunha, et al. 45). While improvising on the piano, I sometimes get nervous because I feel pressure to think of something brilliant to play quickly. This anxiety is heightened when I am playing for other people and worrying about what they think of my playing.

Fourth, emergent actions may be overamplified. Companies may create even more unexpected events when using improvisation to handle uncertainty (Cunha, et al. 43). In jazz, musicians may get caught up in a spiral of increasing complexity and become entangled in an unfamiliar, complicated web that is hard for them to escape. They do not know how to successfully revert back to the original melody, or “de-improvise.” This would happen more often to inexperienced jazz musicians like myself who may not have or know how to apply the correct combination of procedural and declarative memory when faced with formidable circumstances.

Finally, along with overamplification of unpredictable actions, an organization is at risk for relying on improvisation too much. If business people keep getting the outcome they desire by improvising, they may believe that it will always work and as a result become overzealous in their application of it. Instead of employing improvisation when the business setting calls for it, companies may use it in every challenging situation their business faces. This is bad if some of these situations could have been handled more effectively through planning. By improvising too
much people may overexploit factual knowledge and routines (declarative memory and procedural memory) that serve as the basis for improvising (Cunha, et al. 44).

Improvisation also risks disaster because it involves simultaneous listening and playing. As part of the interaction among musicians in a jazz band while playing a song, spaces to improvise emerge for musicians to fill. But there is also a potential for their musical interpretation to sound bad (Hatch 4). For example, someone may improvise but play undesired harmonies or an inconsistent rhythm (Hatch 5). This can be compared to a business situation where an individual or group that has improvised makes a business decision that is incongruous with the company’s short or long-term goals. This would sound “bad” to the company and may weaken the company’s competitive stance in the marketplace. Furthermore, an organization’s “noisy” environment, due to unclear strategic goals and many conflicting viewpoints, may interfere with the firm’s retention of inferences that they gain from improvising. Noise also makes it harder for an organization to focus on improvising (Moorman & Miner 20).

Finally, if a firm values stability, it may not want to improvise and/or may have a really hard time with it. Other people may abstain from improvising because they think that it is too complicated and/or unmanageable. A firm definitely needs to develop a mindset for improvisation. If they are not ready to do it, then the risks of improvisation will probably be realized.

Minimization of Risks

In order to minimize the above risks, it is necessary to ease into improvisation, take one’s time with it, and follow as many of the organizational and individual requirements as possible. Cunha, et al. suggests making use of the company’s original musical score, or corporate strategy, so that people will be able to identify with something familiar when starting to
improvise (44). For example, a lot of companies hang their mission statement in places where it is easy for employees to see in order to inundate them constantly with the company’s values. Furthermore, they may ask cultural questions’ during interviews to make sure that future employees would be committed to the company’s vision as well as understand how the vision guides employees’ actions as they work to accomplish business goals. By understanding their company inside and out, employees can feel more comfortable introducing things altogether new (i.e., improvising) to the organization since they have the background knowledge that helps them decide what would be good for the company.

Despite the aforementioned risks, organizations that improvise can safeguard themselves against normal accidents that can occur in highly complex and technology-driven industries (see Exhibit 1). This is because businesses simplify their structures in order to facilitate improvisation. They have flatter and non-hierarchical structures. The best business settings for improvisation take place in industries characterized by low risk technology, loose coupling and decentralized structures. Examples of these industries are shown in quadrants three and four of Exhibit 1.

Normal accidents are those that occur when incompatible demands are put on an organization, like the need for both decentralization and centralization. Normal accidents would most likely occur when there is tight coupling and complex interactions within an organization. In an organization with tight coupling and complex knowledge, a centralized structure copes with tight coupling while a decentralized structure copes with the “unplanned interactions of failures” that may arise within the complex knowledge systems. As illustrated by quadrant two, examples of failures are oil spills, plane crashes, and nuclear explosions. Improvisation helps
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protect against these because it calls for simpler (or linear) organizational structures that allow for both centralized and decentralized structures to exist.

If organizations are interested in improvising but are tightly coupled and have complex knowledge systems, they should try to decentralize their structure somehow to facilitate simple interactions, perhaps by creating small cross-functional teams that carry out specific procedures. By taking efforts to create a structure that facilitates improvisational acts, organizations can protect themselves against harmful business outcomes as well as from the pitfalls of complex organizations since they can not improvise as a whole due to their complexity.

**Relationship between Creativity, Adaptation, Innovation, and Improvisation**

Although creativity, adaptation, and innovation are similar to improvisation, they have different functions in a business setting. All of them seek organizational effectiveness. But improvisation pushes homogeneity while creativity, adaptation, and innovation push variety (Cunha, et al. 16). First, creativity creates something useful such as a product, idea, service, procedure, or a process (Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin qtd. in Cunha, et al. 17). John Kao, author of “Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity,” describes creativity as “intentional, systematic, and sustained” (Kao 51). Creativity is different from improvisation because it can be planned and also postponed as a tool until optimal resources are in place (Cunha, et al. 17). It is not necessary to improvise to be creative (Moorman & Miner 6). But, I firmly believe that creativity is needed in order to be able to uniquely combine resources on hand to create something altogether new and thus improvise.

Next, adaptation and improvisation are both organizational constructs that influence a company to change in response to macroenvironmental changes. The main difference between
them is that improvisation converges in time the design and execution of action, while adaptation can occur before implementation. Companies can prepare for adaptation because they have the time to think through and plan out what resources they will need to have in place in order to adapt (Cunha, et al. 17). Improvisation is used when it is too late to adapt. For example, companies may feel more comfortable adapting their business practices to correspond with macroenvironmental changes, but may have to improvise if they are in a time crunch and have to change instantaneously.

Improvisation is a form of innovation. Innovation is “the adoption of any product, service, device, or program that is new to the organization” (Dougherty qtd. in Cunha, et al. 17). Innovation is like adaptation because one can plan and prepare for it. All of the resources usually have to be in place in order to innovate. One should note that there is a 90% failure rate for innovation, and people trying to do it should be able to tolerate imperfection (Cunha, et al. 27). Because innovation is limited in scope due to the quantum changes in the macroenvironment, an organization may be forced to improvise in order to keep up with the changes (Bettis & Hitt qtd. in Cunha, et al. 18).

**Structure and Improvisation**

Based on the requirements I have outlined previously, I believe that certain structures will facilitate improvisation in an organization better than others will. Organizational structure should be designed to equally distribute information, resources, and authority. Furthermore, proper design can facilitate the role of the manager and help him or her control and coordinate information, allowing information and resources to flow through the organization better (Weick, *Organizational Redesign* 349).
I propose that a matrix-like structure will be most effective for improvisation for a multitude of reasons. First, it allows for vertical and horizontal communication flow, which is necessary in order for everyone to improvise so that they are aware of everyone’s actions and can therefore “listen” better. Second, matrices are flexible and allow for creativity. They are employable when resources are scarce, which is an integral part to improvisation (i.e., the making do with whatever resources are on hand, or bricolage). Matrices also allow for the transfer and movement of people which is necessary for the different “soloing” and “comping” that each employee will take turns doing. Finally, a matrix-like structure is beneficial when there is high specialization along key activities and/or products and services (see Exhibit 2). For example, the manufacturing of nuclear weapons is a highly specialized process. Improvisation can occur in this area if a company sets up many cross-functional teams that simplify interactions by focusing on the production of specific parts of a nuclear weapon, thereby specializing business activities. This is better than having few teams that work within complex systems and are responsible for entire lines of various nuclear weapons, because this is when there is more potential for unplanned failures (see Exhibit 1).

Improvisation is also applicable where there is low specialization in business processes. In this case, the company would not have as many people involved in activities and thus would not require the cross-functional teams that characterize the matrix structure (Pitts & Lei 72). Instead, an assembly-line type structure would suffice, as long as it still allowed for maximum flexibility within the firm.

There are some serious disadvantages to the matrix structure, which is why a structure similar to a matrix should be built within an organization to avoid some of these shortcomings. High cost structure, slower decision-making, increased stress and tension, lower level of comfort
with company infrastructure, and conflict between superiors who control different ends of the matrix are problems associated with the matrix structure (see Exhibit 2). Consequently, a flat structure with cross-functional teams that are working on specific projects may be the best structure. These process teams should be relatively small to allow for maximum flexibility and close interaction with customers so that they can improvise in order to meet their needs (Crossan, et al. 7).

A hybrid of hierarchical and performance-based systems is effective within the matrix-like structure of the improvising organization. A hierarchy promotes close relationships among staff and encourages group and team effort (Pitts & Lei 349). A performance-based system enhances individual initiative, entrepreneurial thinking, and motivation for personal achievement (Pitts & Lei 352). Therefore, a blend of both of these systems models some of the prerequisites for successful improvisation within an organization.

It is my hope that by following all the prerequisites for successful improvisation, an organization can tweak its structure to make the best fit for creative expression. For example, an organization that is truly improvising will not be concerned with professional titles because everyone is a leader. Increased stress is probable at the beginning when organizations are learning how to improvise, because it takes a lot of practice and time. This should decrease once the organization feels comfortable with improvising, although the amount of time it takes to feel comfortable depends upon the organization and its culture. One way to quicken the “learning” process is to develop a “Greenhouse for Change” (Pascale & Miller 64-72). This is a structural change that Shell Malaysia initiated in order to re-invent its downstream marketing and distribution system (Pascale & Miller 64).
Chris Knight, the CEO of Malaysia Shell, created “action labs” designed to produce results in sixty days (Pascale & Miller 67). These “laboratories” were founded on the truism that “we are much more likely to act our way into a new way of thinking than think our way into a new way of acting” (Pascale & Miller 69). This is exactly what improvisation involves: acting and thinking simultaneously, and in some cases, acting first and then making sense out of what just happened. “Action Labs” are made up of cross-functional teams and facilitated by informal leaders. All in all, the lab tries to set up an ideal environment for improvisation by breaking hierarchical levels and ingrained mind-sets and assumptions and instead fostering an open and creative environment (Pascale & Miller 66).

Furthermore, by analyzing jazz structures, organizations can determine how to create an open structure that best fits their organization. Jazz structure is marked by ambiguity, emotion, and timeliness (Hatch 4). By understanding how those three constructs influence the structure of jazz, a person can understand how they influence the structure of an organization. First, there exist empty spaces created by the ambiguity in structure that are left for employees’ creative interpretation (Hatch 9). Employees may improvise around the four types of structural ambiguity: ambiguity of intentions, ambiguity of understanding, ambiguity of history, and finally the ambiguity of the organization itself (Hatch 9). Ambiguity of intentions’ empty space is the mismatch of intentions, ambiguity of understanding creates empty spaces when there are multiple interpretations of feedback, ambiguity of history occurs when there is confusion about the sequence and contents of past events, and ambiguity of organizations exists when there is confusion around the reorganizing of organizations.

Second, the organizational issues discussed in this paper involve human beings and their interaction with each other; as a result, emotions are going to be involved. Part of the
The communication aspect of improvisation deals with individuals’ physical and emotional feelings in addition to their intellectual stimulation (Hatch 11). Emotion is a critical aspect that molds organizational structure in a similar way to jazz structure. In jazz, the emotion makes the structure implicit. For example, the groove—emotion—that musicians feel when they are losing themselves in the music makes implicit the tempo and rhythm—structure—that the band is playing. By feeling you can understand structure (Hatch 11) because structures emerge as feelings emerge (Hatch 6).

In business, emotional connection is created through teamwork. Once group members feel the “groove” and focus completely upon accomplishing a shared goal they can disregard any formal structures. As a result, people can lose any selfishness and instead focus on the overall good of the group (Hatch 12). Teams that work really well together and obtain synergy can communicate effectively with their customers because their team cohesiveness translates positive energy into interactions with their customer (Crossan et al.10). Interestingly, people who are in touch with their feelings have a higher potential for getting into their work groove that contributes to peak performance (Hatch 12).

Third, timing has a lot to do with business and jazz structures. For example, in business, there is an inherent tempo that can be found in day-to-day operations that just “feels right” to employees. For example, a timeline can influence a company’s inherent tempo because it identifies times when certain goals need to be met. Studies of group projects have detected a pattern to people’s sense of urgency in their work according to how close they are to meeting a deadline. At first, workers are consistent with their work but at the end they speed up in order to make sure they meet their goal (Hatch 13).
Next, structure in and of itself mixes a unique blend of time from the past, present, and future in both jazz and business (Hatch 12). In terms of an organization’s performance, employees will have memories from past performances—like historical market performance and interaction with competitors—more or less depending upon how long the person has been with the organization. They will understand how and why norms have been created. These norms are manifested in a company’s culture through storytelling, joking, social activities, etc. In turn, the future is connected to the present and therefore the past (since the present incorporates the past) because a company’s current business situation helps them predict how they will perform in the future (Hatch 15). How a company performed in the past also gives people hope for how successful they will be in the present and future, and what core competencies of the company have made a difference in the marketplace. If a company leads the industry in technology, they will strive to be the leader of technological advancements and do everything they can to accomplish that goal. By looking at historical industry trends one can see that history repeats itself in jazz and in business!

Similar to a business’ performance, the jazz band’s performance links the past, present, and future. This occurs throughout the performance as musicians improvise the structure of the jazz song. To illustrate, jazz musicians will play a particular melody that they have played before and re-create it according to what band members are playing, thus improvising. Each phrase they play sets the stage for what they will play next. Subsequent phrases are voiced with variations of the chords that were just played. From moving around within the jazz song’s structure, jazz musicians can create another phrase. This exemplifies the paradox of being continuous and discontinuous with the past at the same time (Hatch 8). Likewise, in an organization, employees can “create another phrase,” or business idea, by moving around within
the organizational structure, or improvising from the organization’s existing framework. All in all, it is essential that individuals actively participate in the operations of their organizational entity (be it a jazz band or a business), if they want to influence the relationships between the past, present, and future (Hatch 15).

Although improvisation is most effective in a nimble and flexible environment, jazz and business should always be built upon a structured framework. Even “free jazz,” which does not usually play within the framework of the melody (or head), needs some structure because musicians need to know from what starting point they can improvise. Recognizing a structure makes it evident when musicians and business people step out of that framework to improvise (Hatch 7).

**Corporate Strategy and Improvisation**

Strategy is defined as the overall plan for deploying resources to establish a favorable position (Wooten, *Course Introduction*). It is both pre-planned and reactive to changing circumstances in the micro and macroenvironment. The macroenvironment is defined as the “economy, political-legal environment, technology, demographics, socio-cultural trends, and current market conditions” (Wooten, *Course Introduction*). Improvisation is helpful here because it can help a company be proactive in implementing strategies so that it can be the quickest to move in today’s fast-paced macroenvironment by successfully managing the constant changes. It is essential that companies improvise when they implement their corporate strategies. Referring back to the four degrees of improvisation (see pages 15 and 16), those actions that are more of an interpretation and embellishment of an organization’s existing framework may lead to a decreasing adaptation rate to corporate strategic changes that differ from the norm since they
are more dependent on the original model. Whereas, those actions that are a variation of an organization’s existing framework and even improvisational, may lead to an increasing adaptation rate to corporate strategic changes because they [variation and improvisation activities] depend less on the original model (Zemke, personal interview).

Like improvising, implementing strategy can be a challenging job but one that is well worth the effort. Similarities between the improvisational process and strategy implementation process are the following: 1) They are both “action-oriented;” 2) They both deal with uncertainty; 3) They involve everyone in the organization; 4) Procedural and declarative memory influence their results; 5) Perseverance is an essential component to their execution; 6) Success depends upon the motivation and leadership of employees; and 7) A diverse mix of personalities and individual histories with the company enhances their success (Wooten, *Strategy Implementation*).

Two examples illustrate how the above similarities manifest themselves in business situations. First, my strategy course is an action course—it is case-based learning, which is learning by doing and therefore an emergent process like that of improvisation (Wooten, *Analyzing Corporate Strategy Cases*). Next, business people have myriad conventions that they can call upon when they implement their strategies by improvising, just like jazz musicians have myriad conventions to employ when they improvise. Business people can create cross-functional teams to create new things using a combination of stored declarative and procedural memory, compile an industry report based upon their current business situation, create action labs, or discover new ways to do information searches in less time (Weick, *Improvisation Mindset* 545).

The most important thing to realize is that people who are implementing the strategies and who therefore are improvising determine the success of the implementation process, just like
people who improvise determine how effective that process will be. Again, improvisation relies greatly on people’s social skills and how much they respect each other. Employees should expect that some of their coworkers will resist change. They can prepare for this by learning how to help employees see the positive aspects of improvisation. For example, they can help motivate employees to engage in improvisation by providing them with examples of times when improvisation resulted in successful business outcomes. Or, if the organization has never improvised yet, then perhaps feeling a sense of urgency can motivate employees. For example, if employees have a sense of exigency with regard to rapid industrial changes and realize that the firm must do something immediately in order to maintain competitiveness in the marketplace, they will be more apt to improvise. It may be helpful to demonstrate to reluctant employees that the risks of not improvising outweigh the risks of improvising. A company can also influence those people who do not want to improvise and change by providing a work environment that rewards creativity and by offering compensation incentives. Companies can also design policies that encourage people to improvise whenever they are faced with limited resources (Wooten, *Strategy Implementation*).

Employees’ improvising capabilities and thus aptitude for implementing strategies are influenced by the following factors: job knowledge; fortitude; social capital; diagnostic, administrative, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills; leadership style—servant or dominant; perception of self-role, and the business context in which one is improvising (Wooten, *Strategy Implementation*).

When developing a corporate strategy, organizations need to be deliberate. First, they need to select able people who are capable of improvising—those who are willing to be flexible with their work environment and those who incorporate all of the necessary individual
requirements for effective improvisation as mentioned earlier. Second, an organization must work at cultivating these skills within their people and conducting improvisation practice exercises. Organization Design Practices, or ODP, are those that a firm employs within the framework of its structure to implement a strategy. For example, staffing policies are an ODP where employees and managers are hired and they can be taught how to improvise during training (Pitts & Lei 346). Again, an evaluation system that rewards creativity and improvisational acts is also an ODP and a good idea to implement within an organization’s culture (Pitts & Lei 346). Third, companies should organize their business process, value chain, and decision-making activities in the most effective way to execute strategies (Wooten, Strategy Implementation). Strategy implementation through improvisation will run smoother with these three proposals fulfilled.

Next, strategies involve risks, innovation and creativity, isolating opportunities, achieving performance targets, and growing the business long-term (Wooten, Course Introduction). Strategies evolve because of shifting market conditions, changes in competition, technological advances, changing customer preferences, new windows of opportunities, and spontaneous business crises (Wooten, Course Introduction). Again, improvisation is an invaluable tool to employ when implementing strategies because it helps manage the unpredictability that subsists during the implementation process.

It should be noted that varying degrees of improvisation, not complete improvisation, are applicable when developing a corporate strategy. This is because the goal of corporate strategies is to create a fit with the overarching organizational framework (Wooten, Strategy Implementation), and true improvisation is creating something new that does not fit in with the framework; hence it is “altogether new.” When companies develop their corporate strategy, they
depend upon creativity, adaptation, and innovation because they observe the changes in the marketplace and try to predict what they think will happen in the future. This means that companies are taking the time to develop a corporate strategy and plan for the resources that they will need in order to implement it. As a result, companies spend more time interpreting, embellishing, and varying their existing resources to develop a strategic plan. On the other hand, if they wanted to create a corporate strategy that had nothing to do with their “pre-composed material” and past experiences, then it would make sense to employ complete improvisation.

While learning to improvise is time-consuming, it will become easier to do even if each business setting for improvisation is completely different. It does not mean that the business problem is easier to solve, but that businesses will become more used to dealing with the uncertainty that necessitates improvisation in a business environment. Consequently, businesses that have a lot of experience with improvising will know how to deal with uncertainty better than other companies. As a result, they will have increased success with implementing strategies, thereby enhancing their overall success in the competitive marketplace.

**Ford Motor Company Case Study**

Ford Motor Company is a prime model for organizational improvisation because of its leadership and corporate citizenship initiatives. First, both Chairman Bill Clay Ford Jr. and CEO Jac Nasser have set the stage for improvisation for their company by modeling servant-leadership. Leadership in and of itself is improvisational because different people emerge as leaders over time when their skill sets match the business situation they face. Today, Bill Clay Ford Jr. claims that the business situation demands that companies are sensitive to societal needs (“What’s in a Name?” 21). Second, Ford Motor Company’s new Corporate Citizenship Council
(CCC), created to develop and implement a strategy that outlines Ford’s commitment to corporate responsibility issues, is a good example of how the company has employed various degrees of improvisation to set the stage for successful improvisation in the future. The introduction of the CCC demonstrates the company-wide transformational change that Ford Motor Company has undergone in terms of its mindset towards corporate responsibility. For example, in the past, Ford Motor thought of the environment as something that put regulations on business operations. The company was consequently motivated to beat those regulations (“What’s in a Name?” 16). Now, the company mindset has changed and is outward-thinking, putting environmental and other social responsibility issues on the forefront of Ford Motor Company’s corporate and political agenda. Moreover, the CCC is a new strategy within Ford that employees can successfully implement by improvising.

Ford Motor Company would benefit from improvising because its environment demands speed, action, and flexibility. Bill Ford Jr. understands this demand for speed and action within the company to keep up with its constantly changing environment. He states that technology is changing so fast that whatever works now will probably become obsolete in six months (“What’s in a Name?” 20). He knows that new technological advances in the industry, such as fuel cells and power cars, are potential core competencies for companies that can manufacture them the best. Fuel cells would be a tremendous benefit to the environment because they produce little pollution as a by-product of their combustion in car exhausts. Still, there are many questions surrounding how fuel cells will be produced in terms of whether companies can shrink them enough, produce them in high volume while ensuring quality, and produce them at a low cost (“What’s in a Name?” 20). This uncertainty revolving fuel cell production calls for companies to
improvise with whatever resources they have on hand in order to be the first to manufacture them the most effectively.

Another reason why improvisation is a beneficial tool for Ford Motor is the need to be flexible in response to the environment. Ford Jr. confirmed this need for flexibility when he noted that many issues arose recently that were not expected or planned for. For example, an explosion at the River Rouge Plant where six men were killed warranted immediate action to handle the crisis. Thus, he improvised with the time, emotion, and energy that he had “on hand” in order to manage the crisis (“What’s in a Name?” 16).

The two main leaders of Ford, Bill Ford Jr. and Jac Nasser, encourage improvisation within the company through their actions. They are servant-leaders because they facilitate the improvisational process within Ford. Because Ford has many opportunities for leadership, many employees emerge as leaders at various times if their skill sets correspond to what the current business situation necessitates. Thus, Ford Motor Company also exhibits rotating leadership.

Ford Jr. and Nasser have the potential to be great improvisers themselves because of their varied past experiences that have given them knowledge of what to do in many different business situations. Both have had a variety of jobs at Ford. The Chairman has been a product planning and marketing analyst as well as an ad and international finance specialist. In addition, Ford Jr. challenged the system. In the 1990s when he was director of business strategy, he tried to plan a meeting to discuss environmental issues, but no one showed up (Morris 126). Even then his actions exhibited various degrees of improvisation. For example, Ford Jr.’s initiative to discuss environmental issues with top managers at Ford Motor was an example of variation because he tried to “insert” something new into the existing strategy—a forum for open discussion of environmental issues.
Meanwhile, CEO Jac Nasser has also had a wide variety of jobs, including group vice president of product development, president of automotive operations, and manager of Ford Motor’s operations in Australia and Europe (Morris 134). Despite Ford’s and Nasser’s different backgrounds and leadership styles, they work together very well because they have the freedom to make decisions in every area of the business (Morris 134). This creative expression gives rise to situations where Ford Jr. and Nasser can improvise when making important business decisions.

Jac Nasser promotes improvisation through open communication. “Communication is one of the greatest assets improvisers have for spontaneous performance” (Crossan et al. 12). Jac Nasser communicates with the entire company by sending out a weekly e-mail entitled “Let’s Chat about the Business” (see Exhibit 3). Employees worldwide receive his message and can e-mail him responses or questions (Zemke, e-mail). This open communication that Nasser expedites throughout the company gives employees the flexibility to improvise in their work environment if they so desire, since they have up-to-date knowledge of the current business situation. Open communication among employees also benefits Ford’s stakeholders, such as customers, because it promotes the development of trusting relationships (Crossan et. al 12).

Next, Bill Clay Ford Jr. has improvised leadership at Ford and created an altogether new model for 21st century executive leadership (Morris 124). He does many things to set the stage for successful improvisation within Ford Motor Company. First, he leads by example. He makes clear his commitment to driving change within Ford in order to have a positive impact by taking the initiative to create many changes. He makes sure employees realize that he views everyone at all levels of the company as one unit, thus disregarding the hierarchical “us versus them” attitude (Morris 136). Second, Ford Jr. realizes how important it is for everyone to
embrace Ford Motor’s transformational changes in regards to corporate citizenship (“What’s in a Name?” 18). In fact, he has received a swell of support for Ford’s environmental action and leadership from people at various ranks within the company. They shower him with letters and e-mails, showing him that they are willing to improvise in order to make transformational changes at Ford (“What’s in a Name?” 17). This is positive because the more people on the same wavelength at Ford, the higher the potential for improvisation to work at implementing the CCC’s strategy.

Third, Ford Jr. is very communicative with all employees. In a recent interview with the editors of Green @Work magazine, he stated that he replies to the e-mails he receives from employees (“What’s in a Name?” 21). Ford Jr. also consistently communicates openly with NGOs—Non-Governmental Organizations—about corporate responsibility issues and in so doing has played an integral role in the creation of several collaborative partnerships. He has also been talking with CEO Sir John Browne of British Petroleum for several years about environmental stewardship in high-polluting industries such as those of petroleum and the automobile. Still, Ford Jr. realizes that there will be times when Ford and its partners will not agree due to the broad spectrum of ideas that are brought to the table when they engage in dialogue. As a result, he makes sure that they communicate in an environment that is open to creative and different ideas, an environment that also promotes improvisational ideas. Ford Motor Company’s relationships with external stakeholder groups has contributed to setting a stage for improvisation within the company because it brings more knowledge to the firm about the current business situation with regard to corporate citizenship issues. Ford Jr. also states that it motivates employees to see Ford Motor involved in their community because it shows that the company stands for something (“What’s in a Name?” 22). Likewise, improvisation also
motivates employees to work more because they receive more feedback from leadership (see page 35).

All in all, Bill Ford Jr.’s actions have helped to create a collaborative and mutually respecting culture within Ford. His leadership has also demonstrated that someone can combine “an industrialist’s pedigree and an idealist’s sensibility to steer a Big Three auto-maker” (Morris 124). This statement is an example of a paradox that characterizes improvisation at Ford Motor Company.

Before Ford Motor starting initiating changes throughout the company, it was facing an objective reality. The environment it was in—the automobile industry—created its objective reality. However, Ford perceived the environmental conditions to be different from the traditions of the automobile industry over the years. That is why it was ready to make a change. As a result, Ford employees started to initiate changes within the company in order to create the environment in which they had originally expected to be operating, one that fulfilled society’s needs by paying close attention to corporate responsibility issues. One of those transformational changes was the initiation of the CCC to re-direct the company’s strategy. Part of the changes may be planned, as was the CCC by Jac Nasser, Bill Clay Ford, Jr., and Deborah Zemke. But in alignment with the definition of objective reality, the emergent changes that result from the planned changes may be improvised (Mintzberg & McHugh qtd. in Cunha, et al. 23; also see page 29 in this document).

Ford was creative in developing the CCC to adapt its strategy to meet the current needs of society. The CCC is an innovative unit because for the first time in Ford Motor Company’s history, management created a business council, whose sole purpose was to come up with a strategy for how Ford would deal with corporate responsibility issues. In accordance with what
is stated above, the CCC was planned, yet all changes initiated at Ford that result from the CCC giving Ford a new direction, can be improvised. In essence, Ford Motor has planned for improvisation through the development of the CCC because the council provides a framework, from which the company can improvise in response to the changing macroenvironment. By developing the CCC, Ford Motor has developed an improvisational mindset.

Some background information regarding the Corporate Citizenship Council is necessary. First, it is made up of 10-12 company Vice Presidents who meet once every quarter to talk about Ford’s business strategy. Corporate citizenship is very important to Ford Motor Company and therefore the CCC was created to determine how Ford addresses social responsibility issues such as global climate change, urban congestion and sprawl, and human rights. Ford’s new strategy is open, transparent, and focused on social and environmental issues in addition to economic issues. The company has developed partnerships with NGOs and non-profit organizations in order to propel this movement further and prove their commitment to helping find a solution to some of the world’s most pressing problems. I have talked with the secretary of the CCC, Deborah Zemke, who is also the Director for Corporate Governance at Ford Motor Company. Her primary role in the CCC is to increase awareness of socially responsible issues among the council’s members and to increase creativity among the members as they develop Ford’s strategy and discuss the best way to integrate it among thousands of Ford employees (Zemke, personal interview).

The CCC was two individuals’ brainchild: Jac Nasser and Bill Clay Ford Jr. It can be related directly to jazz. First, Jac Nasser and Bill Clay Ford, Jr. have “played the notes from the same key signature,” meaning that they have selected executive vice presidents, the notes, across the company, the key signature, to participate in the council. The CCC is like a jazz combo
whose song is the strategy. The type of song that the council plays is determined by the current business situation. Next, the executive vice presidents create the song’s tempo and have a responsibility to motivate employees to “dance,” or work hard. Employees can either dance by themselves, in groups, or with other “musicians from different bands,” or people from partnering organizations. The VPs of the council’s goal is to develop a “groove” within the organization to attain maximum effectiveness.

The song’s musical arrangement dictates how Ford Motor will implement the strategy. The musical arrangement is said to be the most powerful causal variable in the whole musical schema that influences the cognitive map of musicians (Voyer 73). This means that Ford Motor’s strategy implementation process influences employees’ cognitive maps more than anything else does.

Because this is a new way of thinking for Ford, it takes a long time to implement this new strategy in the same way that it takes a long time to learn how to improvise. Ford is re-learning how to do business: employees have to unlearn the traditional business style at Ford, learn the CCC’s new strategy and pertinent issues, and then integrate the new teachings into normal business practices (Zemke, personal interview). Once the strategy is implemented, it will be integrated into daily business practices so that people will automatically think of the triple bottom line—socio-cultural, environmental, and economic—when they make decisions. Likewise, once a company learns how to improvise, it can access that skill in an instant. Improvisation can facilitate the successful implementation of Ford Motor’s new strategy by helping employees manage the unpredictability of the macroenvironment and respond to the constant changes, which in the past may have prevented them from successfully implementing new strategies.
The changes within Ford on account of the CCC’s new direction reflect a new attitude towards corporate citizenship as well as exhibit various degrees of improvisation. First, Ford’s corporate strategic framework outlines three obligations: to give shareholders the best possible return that they can, to give consumers exactly what they want, and to do all of this responsibly to avoid harming society in any way (“What’s in a Name?” 19-20). Ford Motor Company has interpreted this strategy by revising and refining the company’s environmental goals. Ford has embellished it by realigning the existing corporate strategy to incorporate new environmental goals. For example, Jac Nasser’s weekly e-mail to the company now includes updates on recent progress with the CCC. Next, Ford took a bold action by pulling out of the Global Climate Coalition in December 1999. The GCC is a political group that lobbies against environmental regulations set up to guard against global warming. Ford’s exit from the group is an example of variation because the GCC corresponded to Ford’s old strategy but not to the new one. In a way, Ford was “de-inserting clusters of notes” that had nothing to do with its original melody, or current strategy, but still made a link to its current strategy. Finally, Ford’s creation of the CCC and its integration into the whole company is an example of improvisation because it is something that is altogether new—a transformational change—for the company. An example of a by-product of the CCC could be the development of a brand new SUV that is fuel-efficient and has the same performance capabilities as old SUVs. This new product development would be a result of improvisation. Because the CCC is still in its developing stages, we cannot be certain that the latter will happen.

The CCC exhibits many of the characteristics and prerequisites that are essential for successful improvisation. First, Ford’s council members are trusting and open when talking about their corporate business strategy (Zemke, e-mail). Next, the council is open to people’s
new ideas and input regarding how Ford should position itself in the global market as a leader of corporate responsibility issues. Furthermore, the council itself is an example of Ford’s flexibility because it involves Ford completely changing how it has done business for the past 100 years (Zemke, personal interview).

Corporate Citizenship Council members are senior employees who have been with Ford for an average of thirty years and are extremely talented; thus, they have done the company a great deal of service. As a result, CCC members have increased potential for successful improvisation since their idiosyncratic guidance is quite high: they have had many past experiences at Ford, they have high knowledge of the current business situation, and they are disposed to thinking strategically for Ford (Zemke, e-mail).

Next, a successful corporation must concentrate on its immediate and long-term goals. When jazz musicians improvise in a song, they concentrate on the key signature, which they play notes from, so that their chorus phrasings and left-hand walking bass lines sound good. Ford realizes that its long-term goal of an integrated corporate citizenship strategy will take time. Still, employees at Ford are focused on the goal and put forth every effort to accomplish it. They set the stage for improvisation because if they need to change their business practices to maintain a competitive position in the industry, they will know how to do so by improvising and using whatever resources that they have on hand at the time. Concentration on the long-term goal will help employees prioritize which resources to use to attain it when they are in a setting that necessitates improvisation.

Ford managers and employees listen intently to what people in the company think about corporate responsibility issues. Again, Ford employees world-wide receive Jac Nasser’s weekly e-mail and are free to reply to him in order to find out more information about the CCC or to
send him their thoughts and comments. Since the council is made up of executive vice presidents who have direct and indirect connections to thousands of people at Ford, the council links together every Ford employee. Moreover, Ford listens to all stakeholders’ wishes. In Ford’s case, their stakeholders are consumers, the community, employees, NGOs, lobbyist firms in Washington DC, environmental activist groups, auto workers union, the board of directors, etc. An example of Ford Motor’s good “listening skills” is their formation of partnerships. They are partners with the BSR (Business for Social Responsibility) in San Francisco, the SustainAbility group in London, and two NGOs: CERES (Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies) and WRI (the World Resources Institute), demonstrating that they indeed listen to outside groups.

Ford Motor’s actions prove that it does an excellent job of analyzing the market that it is in. By intensely studying their surrounding environment, the people at Ford have decided that attitudes and actions with respect to corporate responsibility need to be changed within the automotive industry. Ford applies this learning to its business environment in order to catalyze change. For example, Ford has decided to be one of twenty companies that are pilot-testing a new environmental, social, and economic reporting framework known as the global reporting initiative, or GRI (Frederick, e-mail). The GRI is an assembly of corporate responsibility guidelines that global companies apply to their business practices to measure their sustainability performance. Information about the company is included within the report to help interpret a company’s sustainability performance. The following data is included: a CEO statement, key indicators, profile of reporting entity, policies, organization and management systems, stakeholder relationships, management performance, operational performance, and product performance (http://www.globalreporting.org).
In May 2000, when Ford releases its first report on the GRI web site, many people in the
environmental and social responsibility communities will scrutinize Ford’s written commitment.
As a result, the public’s expectations may rise with regard to Ford’s commitment to deliver on its
promises (Rob Frederick, e-mail). This may cause Ford to feel pressure from the public to keep
their corporate responsibility commitments and act on them. This business setting foreshadows
the need for improvisation with respect to the enactment of Ford’s corporate responsibility
commitments. This is because, by improvising, Ford can ensure that it will deliver its
commitments regardless of changes in the macroenvironment. If industrial changes occur that
make it difficult for Ford to fulfill its commitments, Ford employees can improvise to think of a
way to deliver by using existing resources. This shows the importance of Ford’s commitment to
do anything necessary to attain sustainability goals, such as improvise.

Based on the information about Ford’s leadership and the Corporate Citizenship Council,
I have improvised logical support for how they both set the stage for improvisation at Ford. I
predict the following examples of improvisation. First, I believe that the council will direct Ford
to improvise a way to manufacture more fuel-efficient cars to rise above EPA standards and
reduce environmental pollution. If this is the case, Ford’s manufacturing processes will have to
change to build more environmentally effective cars. I suspect that process improvisation will
take place not only with the larger SUVs but also with Ford’s new energy saver electric cars.

Second, as Ford employees learn to integrate the corporate citizenship mantra into their
daily duties and responsibilities, their behavior will change. This will lead people to improvise
their mental maps of corporate responsibility because, as their behavior changes, their attitudes
will undergo a transformational change as well, to be in alignment with their behavior.
Consequently, the CCC can positively influence Ford employees’ perceptions of corporate
responsibility issues and how they are related to day-to-day business operations since the entire company is already taking actions to be more responsible in terms of corporate citizenship.

**Summary of Improvisation and its Implications for Businesses**

There are four crucial questions that should be asked when determining whether an organization is set up for successful improvisation. They are the following: 1) Does the organization have a structure built and systems developed that facilitate effective improvisation? 2) Does a firm’s culture celebrate and praise experimentation so that people feel comfortable with change? 3) Does the organization integrate improvisation practice exercises into the work environment (i.e., right-brain exercises, see page 30) 4) Is the organization willing to tolerate mistakes and the inconvenience of changing? (Crossan, et al. 16). In the words of Karl Weick, a firm must appreciate the “aesthetics of imperfection” (*Aesthetic of Imperfection* 6).

One of the most important lessons of this paper is for every human being to realize that he or she can improvise. It just may take a longer time for some people to learn how to improvise than others, depending upon each individual’s personal attributes and past business experiences. The more improvisational prerequisites a person has developed and the more business experience they have will enable them to learn faster. This means that in a business situation, a person does not have to be an expert in a certain business function, such as finance, in order to improvise to come up with novel business solutions to problems (Cunha, et al. 47). Moreover, even mentally challenged people can improvise if they are given simple instruments/tools (Cunha, et al. 48). When supplied with the necessary tools or instruments, anyone can develop all of the requirements listed above, and as a result become quite a good improviser.
I know this because I am taking piano lessons right now. I have played the piano for the last 17 years and taken lessons for 13 of those years. Still, I never truly learned to improvise and am just now learning the basics of piano theory so that I can do it. I attest to the fact that every requirement is essential to learn how to improvise. I have to practice, study the musical notes, and be confident that I can do it.

**Limits to the Jazz Metaphor and Improvisational Process in Organizations**

While the similarities between jazz improvisation in a jazz band and the operations of a business are striking, it is important to note that a metaphor is good up until the time that enough empirical research has been completed that the metaphor becomes too detailed. When people are really familiar with both subjects that are being compared (i.e., jazz and business) the metaphor loses novelty and therefore loses power. It will be replaced by another metaphor in the future that is new and different (Cunha, et al. 50).

Furthermore, not everyone enjoys listening to jazz and thus some people may not understand improvisation’s powerful implications for businesses. Consequently, the application of the jazz metaphor excludes those people who do not like jazz (Hatch & Weick 603). Another criticism of the jazz metaphor is that it is sexist because there are not as many popular female jazz musicians as there are popular male jazz musicians. This discourages some people from learning about organizations through the jazz metaphor who would have otherwise been interested in studying it (Hatch & Weick 603).

Finally, the effective organization consists of 150 people or less because individuals need to know everyone around them in order to self-integrate and work at their potential. Consequently, improvisation is most effective in groups of only three to six people (Crossan, et
al. 10). This means that large corporations made up of millions of people will not be able to improvise successfully as an entire organization. Instead, they will need to work hard to create a structure that makes use of small teams.

**Closing Thoughts and Sentiments**

As technology advances and people around the world have access to the same information, there will be increased pressure for everyone to manage the change and uncertainty that the information brings about. My thesis should make clear the immense value of improvisation as a tool to handle the unpredictability in various business situations. Specifically, a company can implement its corporate strategy by improvising as long as its structure allows for maximum flexibility. I would like to end with a final “note” of wisdom for all corporations that constantly strive to be the best in their respective industries: Improvise, have fun, and let the musical hum of your business sound out loud and clear for everyone in the marketplace to hear!
Works Cited


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“What’s in a Name?” Green@ Work, Jan.-Feb. 2000: 14-22.


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EXHIBIT 1

NORMAL ACCIDENTS

Figure 9.2

Centralization/Decentralization of Authority Relevant to Crises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linear</th>
<th>Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALIZATION for tight coupling.</td>
<td>CENTRALIZATION to cope with tight coupling (unquestioned obedience, immediate response)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALIZATION compatible</td>
<td>DECENTRALIZATION to cope with unplanned interactions of failures (careful slow search by those closest to subsystems).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with linear interactions (expected, visible).</td>
<td>Demands are incompatible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dams, power grids, some continuous processing, rail and marine transport.</td>
<td>Nuclear plants, weapons; DNA, chemical plants, aircraft, space missions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALIZATION or DECENTRALIZATION possible. Few complex interactions; component failure accidents can be handled from above or below. Tastes of elites and tradition determine structure.</td>
<td>DECENTRALIZATION for complex interactions desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALIZATION for loose coupling desirable (allows people to devise indigenous substitutions and alternative paths), since system accidents possible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most manufacturing, trade schools, single-goal agencies (motor vehicles, post office).</td>
<td>Mining, R&amp;D firms, multi-goal agencies (welfare, DOE, OMB), universities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exhibit 2

**Key Characteristics of Matrix Structures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotes sharing of key resources and skills</td>
<td>Very high cost structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhances fast change and flexibility</td>
<td>Slows down decision making in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps when resources are scarce</td>
<td>Lower level managers often unable to feel comfortable in this structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows for transfer and movement of people</td>
<td>High tension and stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High specialization along key activities and products</td>
<td>Could generate conflict between superiors who are the &quot;arms&quot; of the matrix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 3

From: J Nasser [mailto:jnasser@drbn006.dearborn.ford.com]
Sent: Friday, November 19, 1999 1:43 PM
To: Ford employees and others
Subject: (I) Let's Chat About the Business

Yesterday, Bill Ford and I spent much of the day with a group of our senior leadership discussing one of our five key areas of competitive advantage -- corporate citizenship. Joining in the conversation were two guests, Sir John Browne, the CEO of BP Amoco, and John Elkington, the CEO of London-based SustainAbility, a firm that has helped a number of leading companies develop their corporate responsibility strategies. Like Ford Motor Company, BP Amoco is committed to superior business performance and is transforming itself by fundamentally rethinking what it means to be in the energy industry. Also like Ford, BP Amoco appreciates that corporate citizenship is an essential element of strong competitive performance and has done a lot of work in striving to understand what it means to be a socially responsible company.

Traditionally, many of us have considered corporate citizenship as philanthropy and volunteer programs. Let me assure you, it is much more than that. It's about who we are, what we offer in the marketplace and how we conduct our business. It's our reputation. We will be a leader in corporate citizenship if we are a well-respected, admired and trusted company that people believe contributes positively to society and uses its resources to create a more sustainable world.

Expectations for performance by large, global companies are much greater than ever. It is no longer enough for us to just produce good products and employ and treat people fairly. We are expected to help find solutions to the environmental, social, and economic problems facing the world. We are expected to take the perspectives of the broad range of people and groups who are affected by our operations into account when we make decisions. This doesn't mean we always agree with them -- but they do expect to be heard and responded to. We are expected to operate in a more open and transparent way, including setting social and environmental performance targets and reporting our progress.

I believe that these expectations will increase significantly during the next decade. The number and influence of activists demanding greater corporate accountability are growing rapidly. The Internet gives everyone access to all sorts of information and makes virtual boycotts a reality. Perhaps one of the most important drivers for increased corporate accountability is the increasing cynicism that business, especially big
business, isn't trustworthy. It's no longer good enough to say, "Trust us, we know what's best." Instead, consumers are urging companies to show what they're doing and the principles that guide their business operations.

The automotive industry is likely to be a target of increased scrutiny in the coming decade. Global climate change, urban congestion and sprawl, human rights and globalization are just a few of the issues that will increase public discussion about our role, our products, our impact in the world and our responsibilities.

All these considerations highlight the importance of corporate citizenship to our overall business transformation. Although we've received favorable reaction to some of the actions we've taken recently -- particularly on the environmental front -- our overall reputation as a responsible corporate citizen is mixed. Bolder commitments and actions will be needed to distinguish us as a leader. Consequently, with Bill Ford's whole-hearted support, I have appointed a group of our senior executives to a Corporate Citizenship Council and charged them with the design and execution of an integrated corporate citizenship strategy. Marty Zimmerman, vice president, Governmental Affairs, and Deborah Zemke, director, Corporate Governance, will support their efforts. During the next year, you will be hearing more about the council's work.

Much of the initial emphasis for the council will be on building relationships with a broader group of stakeholders to discuss issues that include the future of our industry in the world and the expectations for leadership in corporate citizenship. Responsible action will accelerate our transition to a leading consumer company and one of the most highly regarded companies in the world.

An inspired global team -- consumer-focused and shareholder-driven, Jac