

# What coaches can learn from the history of jazz-based improvisation: A conceptual analysis

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## Abstract

From early jazz to current sub-styles, the key component, improvisation, is thought to also be important to the coaching process. Improvisation in jazz can be conceptually linked to the dynamic, interactional relationships such as those found in coaching. Using jazz history, this conceptual paper investigates how jazz improvisation may inform coaches and coachees in individual, group, or organizational coaching programs. Several propositions are provided through the relationships between the number of coachees, decision-making speed, group size, level of pre-arrangement, and improvisation. Utilizing the information provided in this paper may prove fruitful for coaches seeking coachee performance through spontaneous creativity.

**Key words: coaching; improvisation; jazz; history; creativity**

## Introduction

Coaching, as a developmental intervention, has seen recent increases in its use in many areas of society (Hardingham, 2004, Lawton-Smith & Cox, 2007). Becoming a vital part of many organizations performance management systems and overall strategies (Joo, 2005), coaching is one of the most significant emerging approaches to employee performance and growth. In circumstances where teams or individual coachees require innovation or spontaneous creativity, coaches need the ability to lead improvisational acts. A main component of improvisation is the concept of creativity. Creativity can be viewed as the process where a new idea, process, or procedure is developed (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006). Improvisation involves creation through performance interactions with and for other individuals (Lemons, 2005). Consequently, improvisation becomes important to highly interactive relationships where a dynamic exchange of questions, thoughts, ideas, and solutions occurs.

Consisting of this type of dynamic relationship between coach and coachee, coaching in organizations is seen to be a cornerstone of many organizations' performance management initiatives (Latham et al., 2005). This coach-coachee relationship can produce a special connection to help people exceed previous levels of performance. However, despite the apparent importance that improvisation and the leadership of improvisation have to coaching, literature on the subject is lacking.

Knowledge generated from the history of jazz-based improvisation may help construct propositions applicable to coaches and their coaching activities. Involving individuals and teams, the case of jazz improvisation may provide an understandable reference for coaches wishing to lead improvisational acts.

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With the majority of coaches reporting that improvisation was very important to a variety of coaching activities (Read, 2013), this suggests that improvisation may be an essential component of many issues dealt with by coaches. The jazz-organization linkage is firmly established in academic literature (Zack, 2000; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001), and coaches operating within organizational boundaries may want to learn how conceptual relationships from jazz-based improvisation could inform their current coaching practice. In related literature, sport coaches have been called ‘orchestrators’, in the sense that they “...organise and oversee an intricate array of interrelated tasks as changes unfold” (Jones & Wallace, 2005, p. 128). This concept fits with the idea that jazz can provide insight for improvisation in coaching, where coaches can behave as leaders of coachee improvisation.

From early jazz to current fusion-jazz sub-styles, the history of jazz-based improvisation is thought to hold important information for innovative coaches. Jazz artists have consistently striven to advance the art form through improvisation, making improvisation a mechanism for innovation. Importantly, the style and practice of improvisation has changed throughout the jazz genres and investigation into only one type of jazz-based improvisation may miss important lessons (Zack, 2000). As a result, this paper will take a fresh look at the history of jazz-improvisation and investigate conceptual linkages applicable to coaches of individuals, groups, or organizations striving for spontaneous creativity. Barrett (1998), for example, advises organizations seeking the highest levels of innovation and creativity to give attention to the jazz improvisation analogy. Moreover, with a consistent 73% of organizational coaches reporting that improvisation was very important or essential to the coaching process; the linkages garnered from the history of jazz-based improvisation are of utmost interest. The coaching activities most frequently cited as targets of improvisation were: coaching conversations, coaching sessions, feedback delivery, team building activities, and simulations (Read, 2013).

To establish the relevance of jazz-improvisation to organizational coaches in all types of coaching relationships, this study reviewed jazz and jazz-based organizational literature in order to synthesize important relationships. Through this review of the history of jazz improvisation, this paper contributes to the coaching literature in four important ways. First, not previously cited as a basis for coaching theory (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008), music and specifically jazz-based improvisation may hold important contributions for coaching practice, research, and theory: expanding the conceptual relationships in jazz improvisation to coaching, may help reveal important characteristics not apparent from other perspectives (Brewer & Hunter 1989). Second, by providing evidence from individual and collective improvisation, propositions are offered for both individual and group-oriented coaches. Third, the essential use of pre-arranged solutions and the relationship with decision-making speed is investigated. The use of pre-arrangement may hold the key to effective improvisations. For coaches with shorter coaching relationships or for those working in time-sensitive organizations, issues surrounding time pressures are important. Lastly, for coaches who desire team-based innovation, this paper examines improvisation and its interaction with group size. The results are discussed in terms of potential conceptual relationships for all types of coaches within organizational boundaries. An overall decision-making guide is constructed for organizational coaches, which may also serve as the basis for operational hypotheses and future research on this topic.

## **Methodology**

Zack (2000) attempts to make clear that any future lessons from the field of jazz need to consider all the genres of jazz. Indeed, by definition, improvisation drives innovation in jazz, and many artists seek to innovate and create new sub-styles based on past performances. Swing, bebop, cool jazz, and avant-garde

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jazz have all influenced each other yet created vastly different styles of improvisation. Consequently, this paper's historical review of jazz improvisation attempts to consider such diverse improvisation styles throughout the development of jazz. In the process, the meaning of jazz improvisation for coaches is investigated, deriving conceptual relationships from the study of the improvisation contained in early jazz to current fusion-jazz sub-styles.

In jazz, improvisation is thought to be visible and easily discerned (Hatch & Weick, 1998) which makes it a perfect platform for investigation. This conceptual analysis consists of a literature review, conducted in both music and organizational literature. The review started with the completion of a university-level history of jazz course which comprised essential readings within jazz history textbooks, audio review of all jazz genres with multiple examinations, and supplemental review of literature dealing with jazz to organization-related analogies. Previous literature using jazz in organizations was also reviewed. As starting points for the review, the 1995 Academy of Management symposium on the jazz metaphor in organizations, and the 1998 Organization Science special issue on the topic, served well. Through reverse-citation searches and keyword searches (jazz, improvisation, etc.) in several main academic business databases (EBSCO, Emerald, and JSTOR), commonly cited, relevant articles were also included in the review.

Throughout the university course and subsequent literature review, special attention was given to the evolution of the styles, methods, techniques, norms, and related characteristics used in improvisation. In this initial stage of analysis, detailed notes were made. Identification and synthesis of important points and patterns in the literature occurred through an iterative process of content analysis. Creating categories is the core feature of qualitative content analysis. A category is defined as a group of content that shares a commonality (Krippendorff, 1980). Qualitative content analysis involves using data to discover or modify categories and goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). Line-by-line, and word-by-word, the content from the notes, articles, books, and documents was condensed into main conceptual categories. The second, focussed stage of content analysis occurred in NVivo qualitative analysis software (Version 8, QSR International) on the notes made in the initial stage of the analysis and produced the specific propositions presented in this paper. Using this ongoing coding process helped reveal conceptual relationships which involve the categories of collective or individual improvisation, the use of pre-arrangement, the pace of decision-making, and the optimal group size. Results discussed below expand on ways for coaches to help stimulate and lead improvisation in their specific coaching context.

## Results

A defining feature of jazz music has always been the presence of improvisation. Significant improvisation is said to produce excitement and exhilaration by containing the unexpected (Ostransky, 1960). In agreement, Baskerville (2003) feels improvisation is a distinctive and fundamental component of jazz music. Earlier Baskerville (1965) defined improvisation as, "the art of composing and performing music simultaneously" (p. 95). When an organization requires innovation to survive, thrive, and recover, improvisational behaviour is essential. Though purely conceptual, the propositions presented in this paper may provide important guidance for current coaches of organizations, groups, or individuals seeking spontaneous creativity and innovation. Coaches may be able to help provide their coachee-improvisers with the best chance to formulate innovative ideas, solutions, decisions, or products.

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### *Use of pre-arrangement*

Improvisation in jazz is thought to involve spontaneous manipulation of musical elements to create the best novel solution possible (Deliege & Wiggins, 2006). An emergence of human thought and action, improvisation is thought to open up a set of distinct explorations which are not accessible through pre-arranged, written compositions (Brown, 2006). However, due to the difficulty associated with improvisational behaviour, musicians sometimes apply pre-arranged formulae while they perform. Even in the early jazz of New Orleans, a percentage of improvisational figures or licks, melodic ideas that fit within a common chord progression, were determined before the performance. In agreement, Sawyer (2000) suggests that almost all jazz musicians utilize some licks which are pre-rehearsed. These short melodies act as pre-arranged riffs that could serve as a basis for improvisational material. Using pre-arranged melodic formulae allowed a common language between musicians, even within spontaneous improvisation. The use of existing or standardized coaching practices will be referred to as using formulae, pre-arrangement, pre-set, or pre-fabrication in this paper.

In the bebop era of the 1940s and 1950s, musicians started to use portions of other songs or licks as part of a larger improvisation. These musical quotations essentially served as fragments of former pre-arranged pieces used by previous musicians. Charlie Parker, one of the architects of bebop, was well known for his improvisational abilities, especially his use of pre-arranged segments in up-tempo music (Martin & Waters, 2006). Parker's use of musical quotations represents borrowed material fitted into his improvisations. However, practitioners of bebop were careful not to create music using too many licks as this risked losing originality.

Once jazz incorporated electronic technology, sampling started to occur. Taking notes or pieces of any other sound, samples were used extensively through synthesizers (Martin & Waters, 2006). Adopting techniques such as sampling, jazz-rock also appears to have absorbed a new type of pre-arranged ideas. Ellington and others are reported to have used more pre-arranged sections to create a "true-jazz" feeling (Collier, 1988). Ostransky (1960) agrees that creating completely free and spontaneous improvisation is a difficult task. When Megginson (2000) touches on the jazz metaphor, he suggests that a possible downside to spontaneous creativity is that it can easily become routinized.

Speaking from experience, Barrett (1998) suggests that, "Jazz improvisers are interested in creating new musical material, surprising themselves and others with spontaneous, unrehearsed ideas" (p. 606). A section of improvisation in a song is seen as representing the ability of someone to link ideas dynamically and uniquely and in doing so create a new innovative idea. Often this improvisational linkage is between composed sections of a song, or even in combination with composed elements creating innovative flow between structures. As a result, the creation of improvisational material is akin to the spontaneous generation of creative ideas, solutions, or innovations. Barrett (1998) reports that most jazz musicians have a large repertoire of licks committed to memory, learnt from past jazz standards. It is also suggested that jazz musicians of the future should be fluent in all previous styles of jazz (Martin & Waters, 2006).

Becoming familiar with previous pre-arrangements and having the ability to quote such formulae if needed is a basic skill of jazz improvisers of today. Coaches of individuals, groups, or organizations wishing to improvise may also need to have a comprehensive knowledge of prior solutions, stratagems and their outcomes to provide the basis for their own improvisational actions. This may also be the case for their improvisational coachees.

*Proposition: For innovative improvisation, coaches need to be familiar with previous solutions, decisions, tactics, models, tools, or products. Moreover, coaches may encourage their coachees to be familiar with previous solutions, decisions, tactics, models, tools, or products.*

Taking this concept further, the portions of improvisation composed of pre-arranged melodic fragments in jazz music may also have an equivalent in coaching. Consequently, the creation and use of pre-arranged formulae (motivic and thematic material, licks, quotations, etc.) is viewed as akin to coaches' use of portions of existing solutions, designs, tools, tactics, or plans which are evoked through policy, stratagem, or coaching models.

Formula use in improvisation seems to be related to the practice of contingency planning. When confronted with a new problem or issue, some coaches check existing solutions or the range of pre-fabricated contingency plans available. It is possible that these pre-arranged solutions could be adjusted, reduced, and combined with improvisational solutions, just as improvisational formulae mesh seamlessly with fresh and spontaneous improvisational ideas.

Baskerville (1965) suggests that an improviser's skill is connected with how well and how quickly experiential memories can be recalled and rearranged aesthetically. Ostransky (1960) suggests that great jazz improvisers spend years learning previous and current work so that it can be modified and adapted in an individual way. Consequently, coaches can strongly encourage coachees to learn about historical events meaningful to the organization, industry, occupation, region, etc., as a possible precursor of creative improvisation.

Helping streamline organizational learning functions, to facilitate ongoing learning, will further aid coaches wishing to lead improvisational coachees and groups. In addition, this finding suggests that coaches themselves need to learn several or many coaching models and approaches as well as be aware of what forms of coaching have been conducted previously on the coachee or in the organization. Given that different coach training is thought to lead to profound disagreements in philosophy and practice (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008), this suggests that additional improvisational-related benefits may result if coaches are trained in more than one style, model, or approach to coaching.

### ***Impact of tempo***

Spontaneous improvisation is quite challenging and there is a proportional relationship between pace and formulaic improvisation. As exhibited by Coltrane, when a piece of music has a rapid tempo, often musicians use formulae (Martin & Waters, 2006). This could be seen as an analogy for the pace of coaching – the speed in which a group or individual needs to solve a problem or make a decision influences the use of pre-arranged ideas or solutions. This sentiment is mirrored by Vera and Crossan (2004) who believe that “improvisational actions in organizations are commonly initiated by conditions of time pressure, ambiguity, and uncertainty (p. 732)”.

Under uncertain conditions (Barrett, 1998) and especially when quicker tempos are required (Weick, 1998) musicians tend to rely on previous material. This suggests that music with a rapid tempo is often driven by pre-arrangement where the improviser uses portions of pre-existing material. The greater the speed of improvisation required, the more likely pre-arrangement will be used. As a result, coaches utilizing improvisation would also need to be aware of the pace required for coachee or team performance or development.

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*Proposition: Coaches need to know the time-pressure and use pre-arrangement when necessary; the greater the speed of performance required the more pre-arrangement is necessary during improvisation.*

As jazz genres increased in tempo and complexity, individual improvisation became the norm. Though some instances of rapid, collective improvisation can be found in early and avant-garde jazz, the general trend seems to indicate less group improvisation as speed increases. Indeed, Weick (1998) suggests that, “full-scale improvisation should be rare in time-pressure settings” (p. 545). This suggests that the greater the speed of improvisation required, the less likely collective improvisation will occur. Jazz history suggests that if rapid improvisation is required, team coaches may be better served to encourage individual improvisers, rather than utilize the entire group.

*Proposition: Team coaches need to design groups with one employee to improvise if rapid resolution is required.*

In team coaching terms, if the pace required for improvisation is rapid, then individual improvisation is more likely to succeed. When laying out group goals and tactics, team coaches may lead certain individuals to take a greater role in creative tasks. If the required speed of innovation or problem-solving increases, it may be advantageous for team coaches to allow more voice to individual improvisers. If time pressure and an individual improviser are combined, team coaches may do best to recommend more pre-set solutions to their coachee.

Team coaches may also utilize some pre-fabricated solutions if they wish to lead collective improvisation; however, rapidly paced collective improvisation may be the most challenging to accomplish if the relationships within jazz are considered. If there is a long-term timeline for task completion, coaches could consider collective improvisation with less formulaic structure.

In the jazz metaphor, most improvisational musicians have many other accompanying functions during performance, which provide lulls between periods of spontaneous creativity. Time-pressure may encourage coaches to push individuals or group members to constantly innovate, but coaches might note that effective use of breaks and mindless (routine) work (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006) is necessary.

*Proposition: Coaches need to provide coachees with breaks and/or periods of mindless work to aid in improvisation.*

If coaching individuals, coaches may ensure coachees get adequate time for breaks and periods of recovery. When group-based improvisation is involved, coaches may always try to give improvisers some accompanying tasks, so to encourage periods of mindless work away from the complexity of spontaneous creation. For coaches, this may be accomplished through goal-setting, re-arrangement of roles, simulations, or repetitive practice.

### **Group size**

Musicians in jazz generally perform in a group. Within this group, the possibility of individual and/or collective improvisation is present. Collective or group improvisation is defined as the simultaneous improvisation of the frontline of the band and involves two or more members of a group improvising simultaneously. All the group members have to be able to listen, react, and adapt their

playing when necessary. As jazz became popular in the bigger cities, individual improvisation became more of a norm and individual improvisers became the focus of jazz.

The larger groups of the Big Band era demanded that sections or riffs be worked out in advance (i.e. pre-arranged). As the pioneers of jazz found when jazz shifted from New Orleans to Chicago, collective improvisation was especially difficult with larger groups. Benny Goodman, the 'King of Swing', seemed to understand that group size had some effect on improvisation. By using a four-member sub-section of his big band for more improvisational-based performances, Goodman seemingly recognized a consistent relationship between improvisation and the number of group members.

In the 1960's Bill Evans was noted for his preference to work in a trio so that collective interaction and improvisation would be simpler. In the same period, both Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea also had small groups that interacted well and created innovative improvisations (Martin & Waters, 2006).

Though collective improvisation is possible and sometimes effective, the likelihood of such improvisation seems to increase when fewer group members are involved. Little previous research has addressed the effect of group size on collective improvisation. Using band sizes throughout the eras of jazz as an indicator, it seems that in smaller groups, the probability of improvisation was increased (to a minimum of three group members) while the probability of effective collective improvisation decreases in larger groups.

*Proposition: Team coaches need to design smaller groups for the highest probability of effective collective improvisation.*

Team coaches may also be mindful of group size during practices, simulations, brain-storming sessions, and discussions. Depending on the strategy employed by the coach, the designated group size could play a role in improvisational behaviour. If team coaches wish for collective improvisation, then they might consider splitting the coachees into smaller groups. Conversely, if team coaches seek individual improvisation behaviour, then they could consider splitting the coachees into larger groups. If team-based, individual improvisation is desired, the group should have cohesion; something that a team coach can help construct through team building.

### ***Groups and pre-arrangement***

Revisiting the idea of formulae in music, Hargadon and Bechky (2006) suggest that for collective creativity "creative solutions are built from the recombination of existing ideas" (p. 485). The formulae and licks used in group improvisation suggest that to organize a larger group, pre-arranged strategies are often employed. As a result, it seems that the greater the percentage of collective improvisation required, the more likely it is that team coaches will require pre-arrangement.

*Proposition: Team coaches wanting to encourage collective improvisation need some pre-arrangement.*

For team coaches wishing to stimulate improvisation at the group level, this proposition suggests preparation and some pre-arranged solutions are necessary. Collective improvisation usually requires more pre-planning and ensuring top improvisers receive periods of mindless work to break between creative exertions. If coaches are assigned to entire groups wishing to spontaneously innovate, such as skunkworks (workgroups that approach projects in unconventional ways) or research and development teams, then they need to learn as much about what has been done previously in that topic, so as to provide

knowledge of pre-arrangement options. Helping facilitate an effective group improvisation may then require that team coaches possess some specific subject-matter expertise and organization-specific knowledge.

## **Discussion**

Combining the conceptual relationships given here may prove challenging for coaches. How these inferences are enacted may depend on the desire and expertise of the coach, structure of the team, and context of the coaching interaction within unique organizational boundaries. To help coaches determine the level of pre-arrangement required for coachee improvisation Figure 1 provides coaches with an improvisation decision-making guide. Though purely conceptual, this tree provides guidance for coaches wishing to lead improvisational acts as well as for coaching researchers wishing to further investigate these relationships.

Beginning with the desire or requirement for coachee improvisation and innovation, a coach's first decision is whether the improvisation needs to be individual or collective. Is the coaching intervention for a sole coachee or for a group? Second, the coach needs to know if the coachee is an individual working alone (performing a solo), a star coachee who is charged to improvise as part of a group, a coachee who rotates improvisational responsibility within a group, or a member of a group which needs to improvise simultaneously. The level of group collaboration is important for the coach to discern, or learn from the client organization, early in the coaching process. This differentiation presents four distinct scenarios which may or may not be determinable by the coach. Third, if the improvisation involves a group, the coach needs to know the size of the group. A small group should be able to function as one unit, while a large group may need sub-groups to operate efficiently. Based on jazz ensemble numbers, a small group is defined here as three to seven members while a large group would be more than seven members. Fourth, the coach needs to consider the timeline required for task completion. If it is a short timeline, then time pressure is a concern, while longer timelines alleviate some pressure. A short timeline may be days or weeks, while a long timeline would be months or years. This characteristic may be bounded by the length of coach-coachee relationship or the extent to which a client-organization provides ongoing coaching. Lastly, coaches need to know what level of pre-arrangement to utilize during the coaching intervention. Given here as low, medium, and high options, these categories represent the recommended level of planned structure based on the propositions given in this study.

Low levels of pre-arrangement suggest that the coach requires little pre-planning, tools, or pre-formulated structure during the coaching interaction; allowing the maximum flexibility for coachee creativity and innovation. Coaches can work on critical thinking and rapid decision-making skills to be efficient in low levels of pre-arrangement. Medium levels of pre-arrangement suggest that the coach utilize some standardization through pre-set instruments, tools, questions, etc. These medium levels of improvisation may represent common coaching interactions where the coach must be dynamic and flexible while moving between pre-arrangement and spontaneous coaching activities. High levels of pre-arrangement suggest that the coach have a set plan, well-structured interactions, and use pre-set instruments when possible; giving less leeway for individual creativity. In this case, coaches could do things such as provide agendas to the coachee beforehand, outlining the next session's activities. As a result, high levels of pre-arrangement suggest that coaches take less input from the coachee during coaching sessions.



The two options marked with an asterisk on Figure 1 represent the low and high end on the recommended spectrum of pre-arrangement. An individual coachee improvising alone with a long timeline for completion is thought to require the least amount of pre-arrangement from the coach. Conversely, a coachee part of large, collectively improvising group with a short timeline for completion is thought to require the largest amount of pre-arrangement from the coach. Many factors, such as client-organization policies, coach and coachee personality, and coaching approach taken, may influence what level of pre-arrangement is possible, so this figure can only serve as a conceptual, decision-making tool for coaches. Consequently, though multiple options are thought to require similar levels of pre-arrangement, Figure 1 cannot help coaches discern between, for example, the levels of pre-arrangement needed for star improvisers in a large group with a short timeline versus that needed for a small group, collectively improvising over a short timeline.

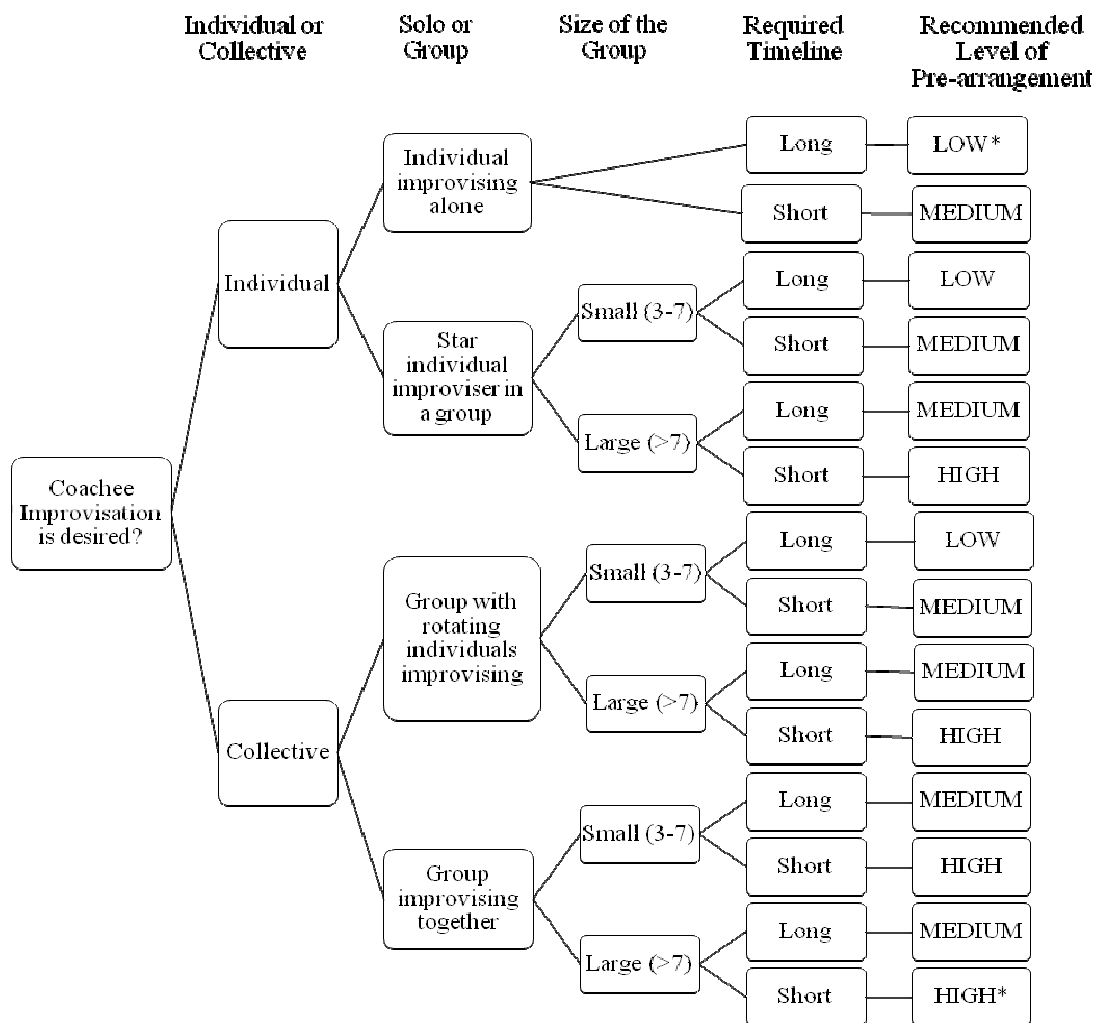


Figure 1: Coach improvisation decision-making guide

### ***Limitations***

Taking conceptual relationships from jazz-based improvisation and applying them to coaching poses conceptual and contextual problems. Hatch and Weick (1998) go so far as to present feminist and elitist concerns about the jazz metaphor for organizations. As constantly shifting social and cultural constraints deeply influence the context of musical creativity (Deliege & Wiggins, 2006), propositions therefore must be mainly conceptual until further empirical research is possible.

Jazz music and musicians, though possessing a similar structure to groups and teams, have a much different employment experience. Though we make the assumption that coachees, as well as jazz musicians, are already highly skilled performers trained in the basics of their field – we cannot know that definitively. Lings, Durden, and Souchon (2010) represent a minority group of researchers that feel improvisation is undesirable to organizations and should be dissuaded due to the greater variance of employee reactions. Coachees may lose focus on the main goals during the process of improvising. Considering this potential limitation, coaches leading improvisation need to be prepared to handle a greater range of unexpected responses from coachees. Accordingly, coaches wishing to encourage improvisation may want to build a climate of risk-taking where new ideas and solutions are welcomed – another task coaches may be able to support through coachee interactions.

The music industry is a unique sector, and jazz is a unique genre within music. For example, in jazz, band members usually had control over their fellow group members. Musicians could circulate within the industry to find the best fit. Often, this is not the case in organizations. Groups can be interdisciplinary or made up of very diverse individuals who do not have much choice in the arrangements. These restrictions would also extend to the team coach, who would need to coach the group provided by the organization. The hierarchical context of organizations did not really exist for jazz improvisers creating complexity when deriving information from this field.

There are many variables unique to each context which will impact a coaching relationship. Are there differences in coach personality or coaching approach? Is a particular coachee hard to coach or resistant? Is there an increased necessity for handling emotions in the organizational context? What is the role of the coach and coachee within the guidelines given by the client organization? Clearly, the inability to answer these questions using the case of jazz improvisation is a limitation of the paper. Nonetheless, with improvisation at the heart of jazz, this context does provide interesting and informative inferences about improvisational behaviour in coaching.

In addition to the difficulties inherent in the conceptualization of improvisation, further investigation into this topic may encounter significant methodological challenges. The quality of the improvisation in jazz is judged subjectively, which may make gauging the quality of improvisations in organizations very difficult. Within jazz music, improvisations are usually clearly decipherable and made to be consumed by the public. However, unique innovations and creative ideas within coaching and client-organizations are often closely guarded secrets with proprietary protections. Measuring improvisational acts or behaviours may prove especially difficult as the processes between idea generation and implementation can be complex. Amabile et al. (1996) insist that for real innovation to occur, a novel idea needs to be fully implemented. In performance-based jazz improvisation, implementation is a matter of course – what is played is instantly implemented. Though evaluation and implementation issues are more complex for coaches, the propositions in the paper may help in understanding the improvisational process.

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Lastly, throughout the history of jazz there has been a troubling linkage between substance use and improvisation. Many of jazz's greatest artists, such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, battled serious substance abuse issues. Many notable jazz musicians battled depression during periods of innovative improvisation. The social context of jazz music may be a contributor, but this trend may be an important indirect effect of repetitive compulsory improvisation. In regard to organizational contexts, Lings, Durden, and Souchon (2010) agree that required improvisation is very stressful. Coaches need to be aware of this potential downside for coachees when encouraging high-levels of improvisation.

### ***Future Research***

The empirical findings and conceptual propositions presented in this paper may serve as the basis for future research on improvisation in coaching. This historical account of jazz-based improvisation may be a future source of operational hypotheses applicable to coaches and organizations. However, given the contextual limitations, future research using the jazz improvisation linkage must make clear the specific context from which it comes. For example, is the organization or group a competitive one? The movement of early jazz musicians to Chicago and Harlem indirectly created more competitive atmospheres. The professional culture and a high level of musical competition resulted in more individual improvisation (Martin & Waters, 2006). The presence of many other proficient musicians seemed to spur musical creativity. This trend of increasing competition resulting in increased individual improvisation may be a fertile ground for investigation. If more competition has a positive relationship with improvisation, coaches may need to have several internal sources (individuals or teams) of improvisation to simulate a competitive environment.

Music without any improvisation would not be considered jazz, and music with extreme amounts of improvisation (like avant-garde jazz) found little commercial appeal in its day. Improvisation can be taken too far, and become incomprehensible. Consistently, a balance between the technical competencies in music and the artistic competencies, such as improvisation, is suggested. Sawyer (2000) discussing the broader tension of jazz musicians trying to balance new creations with adherence to structural limitations. Musicians who incorporate too many licks or portions of previous solos are said to lose status (Barrett, 1998). Balancing new boundary-pushing ideas with previous solutions seems to be the norm in jazz; both within the song, with percentage of improvisation, and also within the improvisation, with percentage of formulae used. This relationship may also be true for organizational leaders of innovation, such as coaches. Gilson et al. (2005) conclude that organizations need to find a balance between standardized and creative work practices. Coaches may have to be conscious of the balance between improvisation and more structured ideas or solutions for most effective results. Hence, this relationship between level of improvisation and coaching effectiveness may be a fruitful one for future research.

Future work into the jazz improvisation conceptual linkage may look at what skills a coach can focus on to improve the improvisational ability of their coachee/s. Would learning and development techniques employed by jazz musicians in regard to improvisational skill also be applicable to organizational coachees? The length of the coach-coachee relationship may also impact the effectiveness of the improvisation. Ostransky (1960) suggests that improvisers take time to exhaust previous material before brief periods of true spontaneous creation. This suggests that longer coaching relationship may have a better chance to produce truly innovative solutions. In addition, the characteristics and quality of the coach-coachee relationship may impact the success for improvisational activities.

Future research linking the various forms of improvisation (theatrical, comedic, sport/combatative (Weick, 1998), and architectural, etc.) may prove fruitful and provide reinforcement to the propositions

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presented in this paper. For example, Brown (2006) has already pulled together much literature on the linkages between improvisation and Vera and Crossan (2004, 2005) have deeply investigated the theatrical linkage between improvisation and organizations. Combining the information from these divergent fields may be a productive extension to this paper.

## **Conclusion**

Slowly, the body of jazz-based literature is growing. Jazz-based improvisation continues to provide grounds for interesting connections to organizations. Distinctive trends and patterns of improvisational behaviour have emerged within the history of jazz. By examining patterns throughout jazz improvisation history, conceptual relationships appropriate for the coaching context were derived. Understanding this analogy may prove fruitful for organizational coaches who wish to lead coachees toward improvisational success. Coaches, just like leaders of jazz musicians, can take action to facilitate coachee improvisation. This investigation into the history of jazz-based improvisation revealed conceptual relationships which may aid innovative coaches to help stimulate individual and group creativity within a collaborative, dynamic environment.

Despite recent attention, empirical investigation of improvisation within coaching remains scarce. For coaching researchers, jazz-improvisation provides a conceptual perspective to use when attempting to measure improvisation with coach populations. The propositions presented here can serve as the basis for a more detailed investigation through actionable hypotheses. A decision guide for coaches undertaking the leadership of improvisation is provided in Figure 1. The boundary conditions therein represent a meaningful contribution to coaching literature. Consequently, this account of jazz history, though conceptual, provides evidence of how improvisation may work for coaches of creative individuals, groups, or organizations.

Overall, this review suggests that for coaches, improvisation may be an essential part of their ongoing success. Having the knowledge to lead coachees and client-organizations to improvise may be a valuable coaching skill. In the realm of group work and spontaneous creativity, the examination of improvisation throughout jazz history has revealed fascinating conceptual relationships. The review suggests that both coaches and coachees might want to learn as much as possible about past solutions, ideas, and decisions, to build a repertoire from which to draw for pre-arrangement. Whether involved in individual or group-based improvisation, coaches can begin to understand the relationships between group size, speed of decision-making, and use of pre-arranged solutions, with improvisational behaviour. With these inferences in hand, coaches in organizations are now better prepared to manage coachee improvisation.

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