



Effective Work Groups & Jazz

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The other night a friend and I attended a concert featuring a jazz quartet. I was a bit disappointed with the overall performance, but couldn't quite put into words why. My friend suggested there was a lack of "dialogue between the musicians." All of them were technically proficient, he said, but it was as if they were each playing in a separate space with no notion of what the others were doing. The bass player kept an up tempo, but when the tenor saxophonist blew unexpected low notes, the drummer failed to echo back with a similar retort. The interplay lacked any depth because of missed opportunity for a dramatic call and response between the musicians. My friend's explanation helped me appreciate the difference between a band simply playing a jazz composition and one creating a stirring and memorable performance.

It also made me think about how work groups can function well, but not necessarily thrive. For a work group to be especially effective there is also a requirement for dialogue among the individuals. Dialogue in this sense, however, is more than simply talking together. The kind of dialogue I'm suggesting for an effective group requires: 1) the opportunity for a personal check in with each other, 2) open ended questions that expand the conversation, 3) active listening that demonstrates true understanding, 4) brainstorming free from real-time editing, 5) embracing diversity to ensure all voices are heard, 6) resolving conflicts as they arise, and 7) resisting group think even when it is easiest to do so.

Think about a time when you were part of a work group that was especially satisfying. I suspect there was something dynamic about the group. I further suspect it was satisfying because you accomplished your goals, overcame challenges, and everyone contributed to the success. More than likely, you were challenged and under stress, but were also stimulated because of the energy from the group.

Like the best jazz ensembles, effective work groups are dynamic, diverse, and challenging. A leader needs to provide the group with just enough structure to maintain focus without blocking creative thinking. Providing a safe and trusting environment can encourage individuals to play off each other's ideas and build something greater than solo thinking alone. A certain synergy becomes



present when everyone is actively involved and engaged in the work at hand. And this is worth striving for.

All work groups can be more effective. And it takes a concentrated effort by every member to actively participate in the dialogue to make it satisfying for everyone.

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