

The music of business: Seminar focuses on how jazz translates to creative success

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Frank Laurino has developed a leadership development seminar that shows organizations how to move past traditional operational barriers, foster creative thinking, and develop their next big initiative with dexterity and buy-in from the ground floor to the board of directors.

He does this by bringing in a jazz band.

"So many organizations today are trapped by their inability to move on a dime. You can't do that in jazz," Laurino said. "You can't form a committee to study the issue. It's 1-2-3-play! Miles Davis never had a focus group, right?"

Laurino, who has more than 30 years of experience in advertising and marketing, has been playing drums since he was a child and performs regularly in a jazz ensemble in Portsmouth. Traversing between the two worlds made something apparent to him.

"Take a close look at the world's leading companies — the ones who always seem to come up with the next big ideas," he said. "They're quick to respond to change with fresh thinking and bold action. Jazz exhibits the same critical disciplines. Ingenuity. Decisiveness. Superior communication. Exceptional performance. Commitment to excellence."

With this philosophy driving him, Laurino worked with his colleague, John Hill Rogers, at Backbeat Creative Strategy, a regional brand strategy and advertising consulting company based in Dover, to create "Creativity & All That Jazz."

Using live jazz as a model, the program illustrates the leadership, communication and performance techniques artists such as Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and John Coltrane used to demonstrate how any stakeholder in a business can gain a competitive edge in today's economy.

Laurino points out that when those jazz legends played together, they were quick to respond to change in the moment — creatively and boldly. They excited their audience, inspired each other and consistently raised the bar — for themselves and others in their field.

In a nutshell, Miles Davis and Apple co-founder Steve Jobs had a lot in common. For example, Laurino said, Jobs and Davis are both renowned for consistently moving forward and embracing change.

"During my years in the advertising business, I've found that the primary reason for bad marketing, bad management, low employee morale and disappearing customers can be traced to one thing. And it's not lack of creative ideas. It's resistance to them," Laurino said. "The lesson to take from Miles Davis is to constantly reinvent yourself. He was doing be-bop, then he went to cool jazz, and as soon as everyone got on board with that, he went to electric land. (For more than) 40 years he was constantly challenging himself."

In much the same way, Steve Jobs went from revolutionizing the personal computer to bringing the world smaller, futuristic formats for computer hardware, such as the iPhone.

Laurino said Jobs and Davis were also leaders who hired the best talent they could find, and listened to them.

"We talk about having a group of virtuoso players who love the spotlight all together on stage," Laurino said. "But instead of competition, you find cooperation. Much of the time, in fact, you see players holding back or not playing at all. They're listening. Improvisation is a conversation, and as with any good conversation, the idea is to listen first, speak later."

The message, Laurino said, is don't be the only rock star in the room. Jobs hired the best professionals, from software designers to media people. And that's jazz — hire the best saxophone player, pianist, drummer — because either everybody's great together or every body sinks together.

When "Creativity & All That Jazz" comes to an organization, Laurino and Rogers bring along some of the most talented musicians on the Seacoast, including Steve Roy on bass, Matt Langley on saxophone and Mike Effenberger on piano.

"These guys make change look fun and effortless — they take the fear and mystery out of it," Laurino said.

Laurino handles drums/percussion and Rogers will sit in on flute, which is part of the lesson.

"You have to let the heads of various departments sit in from time to time. Ask them what they think," Laurino said. "Share the spotlight."

The program can range from an afternoon session to one or two days. Band performances are punctuated by conversations with the audience. For example, Laurino and Rogers will point out that, as in any organization, every player in the jazz group has specific responsibilities that must be precisely executed during every performance. However, these responsibilities can change, and often significantly, at a moment's notice.

"Knowing what to play or what not to play is all part of the job," Laurino said. "The ability to shift seamlessly from various leadership and support roles is essential to responding to new opportunities and maximizing group performance."

Laurino said this is not a team-building workshop. "Not everyone can be in a creative, decision-making position," he said. "You don't bring in a bass player to play the drum part. We teach people to recognize when to step up to the plate and take control without necessarily being in charge. This is about people reacting to problems faster, and being able to respond to new opportunities because they have shifted their perspective."

Depending on the size of the facility, the program can take place on site or off. Laurino will occasionally hold the session in a club.

"Creativity & All That Jazz" is marketed to executive-level management and has been booked by companies that develop software, provide training, and IT security, to name a few.

"Overall, this is geared to people who can affect policy change," he said. "We want business people to change how they're functioning because they are dysfunctional now. Leadership emanates from above and people are hungry for those who create change. People want to believe in somebody. They want to aspire to excellence.

"There's a myth that people hate change. We think people love change," Laurino said. "What people hate is the promise of change and then nothing happens. People feel like they've been dashed on the rocks. In jazz, it's change all the time."