



## ***EMS Jazz***

Over the last six years as I've learned to know people in EMS, I've witnessed the strengths of EMS organizations. In my observations, it appears to me that many of these strengths are reflected in the creativity and improvisation that are a part of the jazz music tradition. Like EMS providers, jazz musicians spend a lifetime learning to be spontaneous. Here are some reflections on organizational jazz:

### **Hanging out**

An essential part of being a part of the jazz community is hanging out, learning the lingo, acting like a jazz musician. Learning is more than just transferring information from one musician to another. Musicians get together to practice, memorize their music, and listen to recordings. For jazz musicians, practicing includes learning to play the same piece of music in different keys at different speeds, practicing together to get just the right combination. New jazz musicians find that they have to learn standard melodies and the norms of the jazz community. Learning takes place as experienced musicians guide less seasoned players through the experience, which becomes a blending of existing knowledge with new ideas. Learning the inside lingo and hearing the stories of past gigs are keys to building understanding of the trade and the personal relationships needed for dealing with the familiar and unfamiliar.

### **Performing by soloing *and* supporting**

In jazz bands, everyone takes a turn in playing the lead melody and backup. The strength is in the mutual participation of all members. The band members each take the leadership role when the opportunity is passed to them by the group. In return the group creates a supportive background, allowing the leader to excel. That supportive background requires careful listening to the group around them, an ability to anticipate the leader's direction, and making spur of the moment decisions based on the group's direction.

### **Balancing habit and improvisation**

While much of jazz is improvisation, creating music in the moment, the foundation is built on years of practice as well as repeated musical patterns. Miles Davis, a renowned jazz artist, is said to have practiced "provocative competence." In 1959, he invited a group of veteran musicians to play music they'd never seen or heard before and record it on the first performance. He created a stressful environment, filled with the obstacle of the unknown. Then these experienced musicians drew on a lifetime of practice, habit, and knowledge to create something entirely new. The result was a landmark

recording: *Kind of Blue*. The jazz musicians were provoked by their leader to use their competence to improvise and create something extraordinary.

### **Relying on flexible decision making**

Improvising always flirts with chaos. In jazz performance there isn't a pre-determined action plan. Instead musicians rely on the group being open to the unexpected, being able to anticipate what might happen next based on what has already been played. They use resourcefulness, on-the-fly decision making, and a willingness to give up the need for predictable outcomes. The music is created in the moment, based on past experience and connections with the other players, resolving the chaos into harmony and symmetry.

### **Turning unexpected challenges into opportunities**

While playing together, there is the risk that someone will take the music in an unexpected direction. A drummer tells the story of a night playing with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie when even the beat was lost. As band members realized what was happening, they silently communicated, allowing the drummer and one band member to find the common "one". The audience never knew what had happened. The band chose to use the error as opportunity. They relied on each other to observe what was happening, adjust and recover. Together they took the challenge and moved on, looking for the performance "groove" -- a place where they were flowing and playing together like masters.

### **EMS Jazz**

Like jazz musicians, EMS providers spend their time studying, planning, and practicing to be spontaneous. They thrive on chaos and the unexpected. They hang out and tell war stories. They build a network of relationships that support EMS providers and their communities. In field operations they dance between standard operating procedures and improvising in the moment. Leadership comes from "the back of the truck" and Service Directors. Communication happens loudly and with hand signals.

I invite you to explore these reflections and expand on them. I challenge you to hang out, engage in serious play, take turns soloing, provoke competence, practice, appreciate the unexpected moment, and allow errors to lead to learning. EMS is an art and a science. Discover the future as it is created.

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