



Quality and all that jazz

Are there similarities between a jazz band and a business organization? Can companies learn from the “tight-loose” creativity and improvisation of jazz, and apply it to a more flexible implementation of ISO 9001:2000?



by Erika Leonardi

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Some organizations regard quality implementation as a laborious, time-consuming process involving needless bureaucracy. They perceive quality management as a heavy burden comprising pointless tasks, rather than offering real advantages to the company.

This is unfortunate. True quality, that which is genuinely useful to the organization and its personnel, can be created by achieving an equilibrium of two extremes – rules and flexibility. And it is through such equilibrium that the organization can attain a higher level of customer and employee satisfaction. Jazz can help us reach these goals.

'Company in jazz'

Why jazz? Because this genre of music has features which distinguish it from all others. Its unique energy and liveliness are generated by the interplay of two elements – arrangements and solos.

A jazz performance has a structure very different from that of a symphony concert. The symphony resembles a typical production process where activities and roles must adhere to definite rules. Variation is neither foreseen, nor permitted.



The management criteria of a jazz concert are very different. The energy and enthusiasm circulating among the musicians is transferred to the audience, whose feedback will further stimulate the band.

'Company in jazz' is a new metaphor in management literature, joining the two apparently separate worlds of a company and a jazz band



In a jazz band, like the Hopeless Jazz Band of Milan, Italy, (seen here), 'each musician must be able to work with others in arrangements, and alone in solos. Much the same happens in a company', says Erika Leonardi (left).

A similarly stimulating atmosphere is apparent in a successful interaction in an organization, or between supplier and customer, for example:

- during a lesson where the teacher not only explains the issues, but also communicates his passion and enthusiasm to the students;
- when a waiter not only offers the menu, but also whets the customer's appetite by his description of the dish, and
- when a nurse gives a warm welcome to a patient, and is sympathetic to the patient's concerns.



“Company in jazz” is a new metaphor in management literature, joining the two apparently separate worlds of a company and a jazz band in ways common to both:

- through the role of personnel;
- through activity management, and
- through type of output.

Music...

The process for realization of a task, whether playing music or providing a product/service, are very similar (see Figure 1).

Each musician must be able to work with others in arrangements, and alone in solos. Much the same happens in a company – the employees work in a group, e.g. in process management or in team work, and also alone, e.g., in their interaction with customers, or in taking autonomous decisions.

Great technique alone is not enough for the jazz musician.

Improvisation, so typical of jazz, originates from the individual's creativity. Self managed, it gives magic to the performance.

Yet here, as in the theatre, this does not imply something put together haphazardly; instead, it is the main “grammatical” expression of the arrangement. Furthermore, it represents a personal expression of the feelings and thoughts of the musician. In the words of the great American double-bass player, Charlie Mingus, “You cannot improvise on nothing. You must work on something.”

...and business

Does the same happen in the business world? Today more than ever, employees are required not only to be competent, but also to be capable of finding new solutions, and different ways of acting and responding. Such abilities are essential in the fast changing work environment.

Let us consider the concept of continual improvement, one of the principal requirements of ISO 9001:2000. This normally involves

streamlining the process flow, identifying problems, searching for innovative solutions, finding new ways to resolve complaints, developing new responses to customer needs, etc. These are not easy tasks; they demand creativity and innovation.

But such elements of improvisation also involve risk. In music, the anticipation of a successful performance is coupled with a fear of the

There are links between managing a jazz performance and managing quality.

Adapted from *Azienda in Jazz (Company in Jazz)*, by Erika Leonardi, published by Il Sole 24 Ore, Milan, 2003.



unexpected. Similarly, at the beginning of any improvement project, one cannot be certain of the outcome.

Yet the charm of jazz is very much related to the unexpected, particularly in the mix of basis arrangement and solos. In other words, the final output is a balance of regulation and freedom.

If rules are essential within the company, then so is some flexibility in their implementation

The heart of the metaphor

If rules are essential within the company, then so is some flexibility in their implementation. This is particularly so in the service sector. Employees need to be trained in following procedures correctly, but should also be prepared to deviate from them if necessary.

And this is the heart of the metaphor. Consider a quality standard as an organizational management model, suitable for any type of organization. If ISO 9001:2000 requirements are applied in a rigid way, the disadvantages will surely outweigh the advantages.

ISO 9001:2000 indicates what the organization should do to achieve an enhanced level of quality. The interpretation of how to achieve it is an organizational affair. This is critical. If the interpretation is on a superficial level, then the resulting procedures will be ineffective. If the interpretation is too rigid, employees may have difficulty following procedures and will tend to work along parallel paths – on the one hand, by following the procedures defined in the

quality manual, and on the other hand, by doing whatever is necessary to get the business done. This scenario is all too common in organizations worldwide!

One solution is to couple rules and flexibility. That is, procedures must establish the essential instructions while leaving room for variations to be recorded, not as nonconformities, but as suggestions for process improvement.

ISO 9001:2000 and jazz

When I talk about the jazz/company metaphor, the most common reaction is a smile. But in my workshops and conferences in collaboration with the Hopeless Jazz Band, of Milan, we look for more significant responses. In these performances, management items are explained traditionally in words and then interpreted in music.

For example, the top management of the Artisans Association of Vicenza Province, Italy, celebrated the start of its quality project by inviting all 450 employees to an old theatre to see our quality and jazz presentation. The music helped me explain that quality is not only a question of rules, but also of flexibility. It also created a delightful and energetic atmosphere.

The results were really amazing. Through the music, appreciation of managerial principles – process, team working, rules, creativity, problem solving, measurement, improvement – became much more vivid.

I believe there is a strong connection between the essence of the metaphor and ISO 9001:2000. The table (below) illustrates the links I see between ISO 9001:2000 requirements, and the jazz “company”:

‘Jazz management’

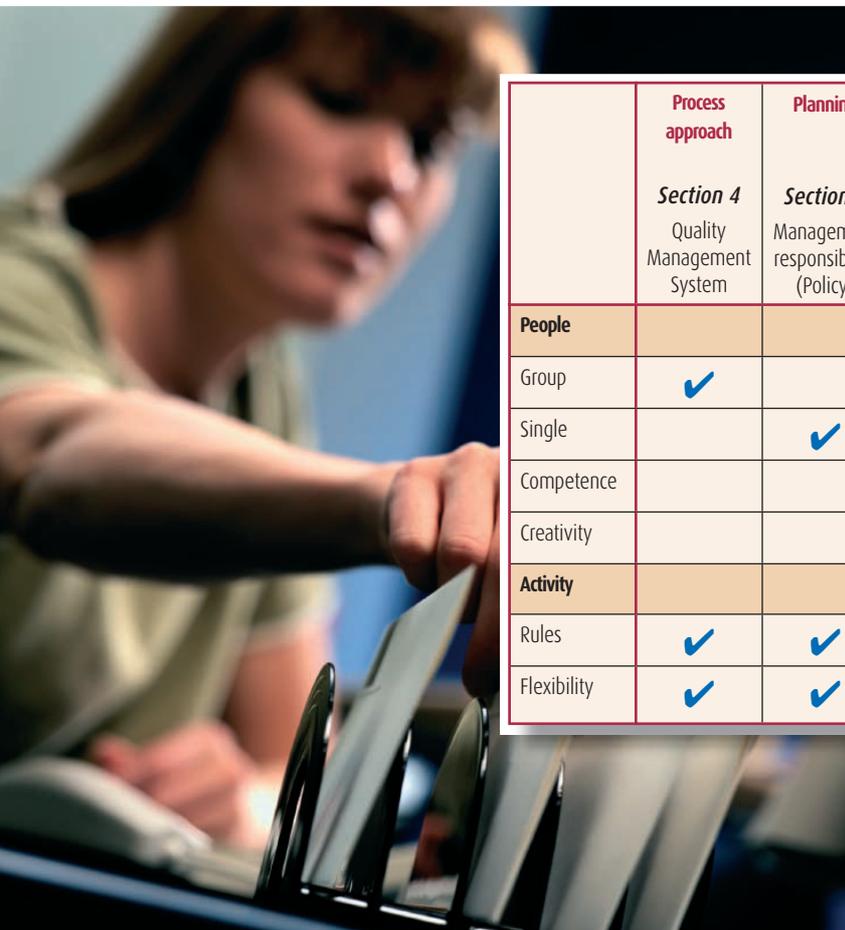
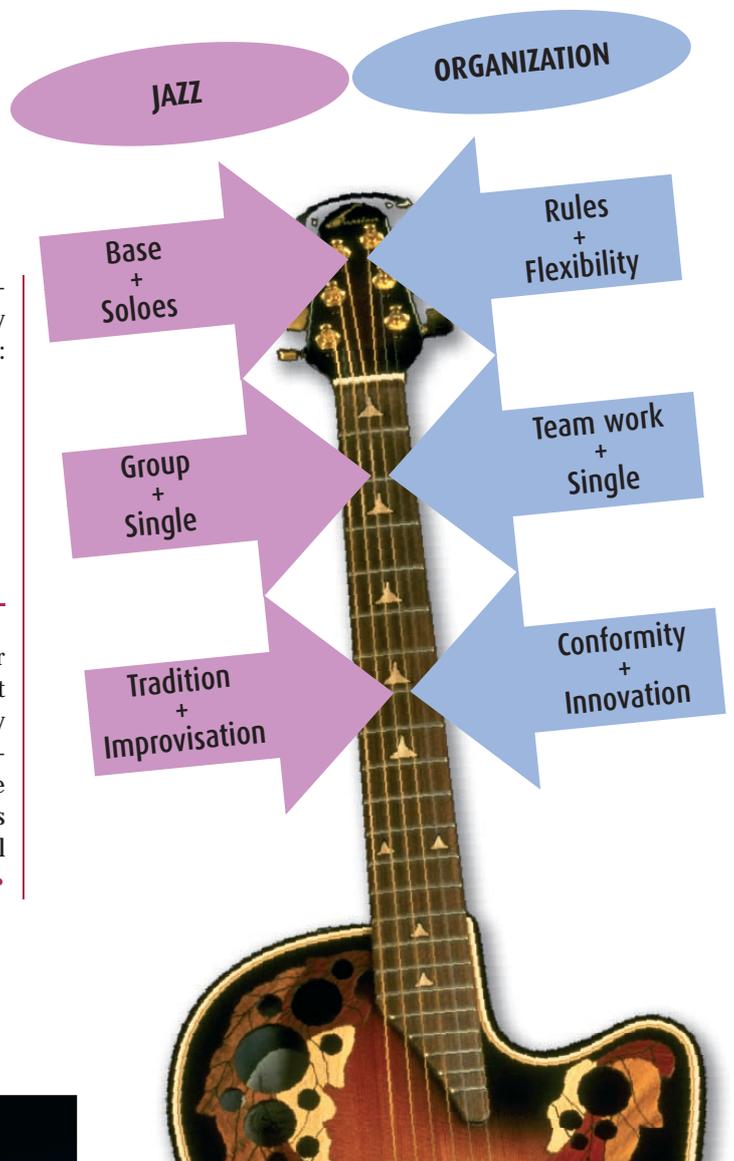
What can we conclude from this analogy? If we believe in true quality, and that ISO 9001:2000 implementation is a must for many organizations, then the jazz management concept can be a helpful tool.

ISO 9001:2000 requirements can be implemented in several ways – in a formal manner, where quality is just a matter of paperwork, or informally, through a genuine desire to carry out a critical analysis of

the organization, with reference to the principles of quality management given in ISO 9000:2000.

Quality is not only a question of rules, but also of flexibility

By implementing the latter approach, you will discover that quality cannot be achieved by rules alone, but must be coupled with flexibility. This is the essence of jazz: arrangements and solos, or, in managerial terms, rules and flexibility!



	Process approach	Planning	Administrative organization	Human resources	Production/delivery	External and internal measurement	Continual improvement
	Section 4 Quality Management System	Section 5 Management responsibility (Policy)	Section 5 Management responsibility (Role, authority)	Section 6 Resources Management	Section 7 Product/Service realization	Section 8 Measurement, analysis, improvement	Section 8 Measurement, analysis, improvement
People							
Group	✓			✓		✓	✓
Single		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Competence			✓	✓			
Creativity				✓			✓
Activity							
Rules	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Flexibility	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1: Analogies between jazz and organizational processes.