

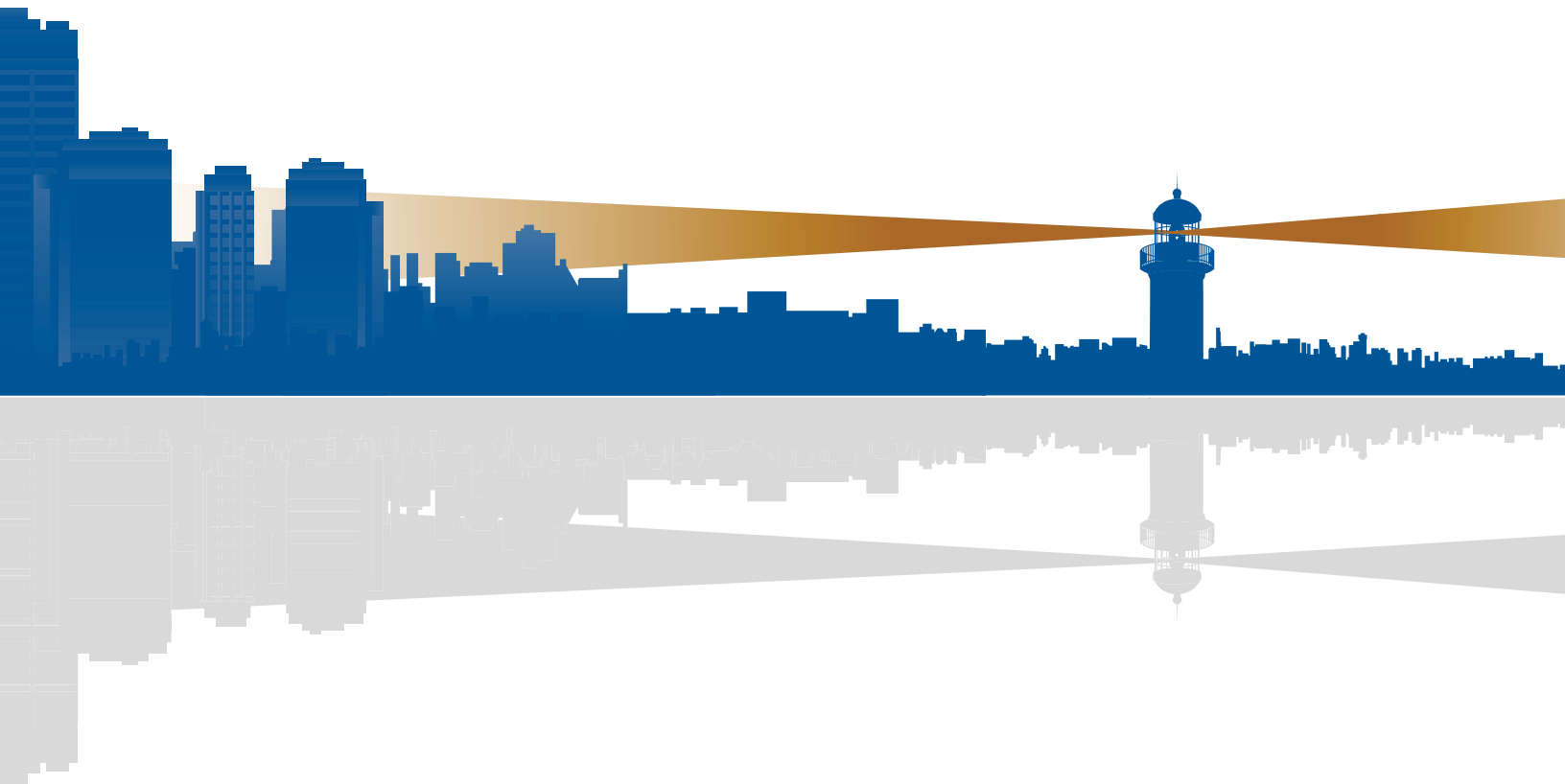


THE BEACON GROUP

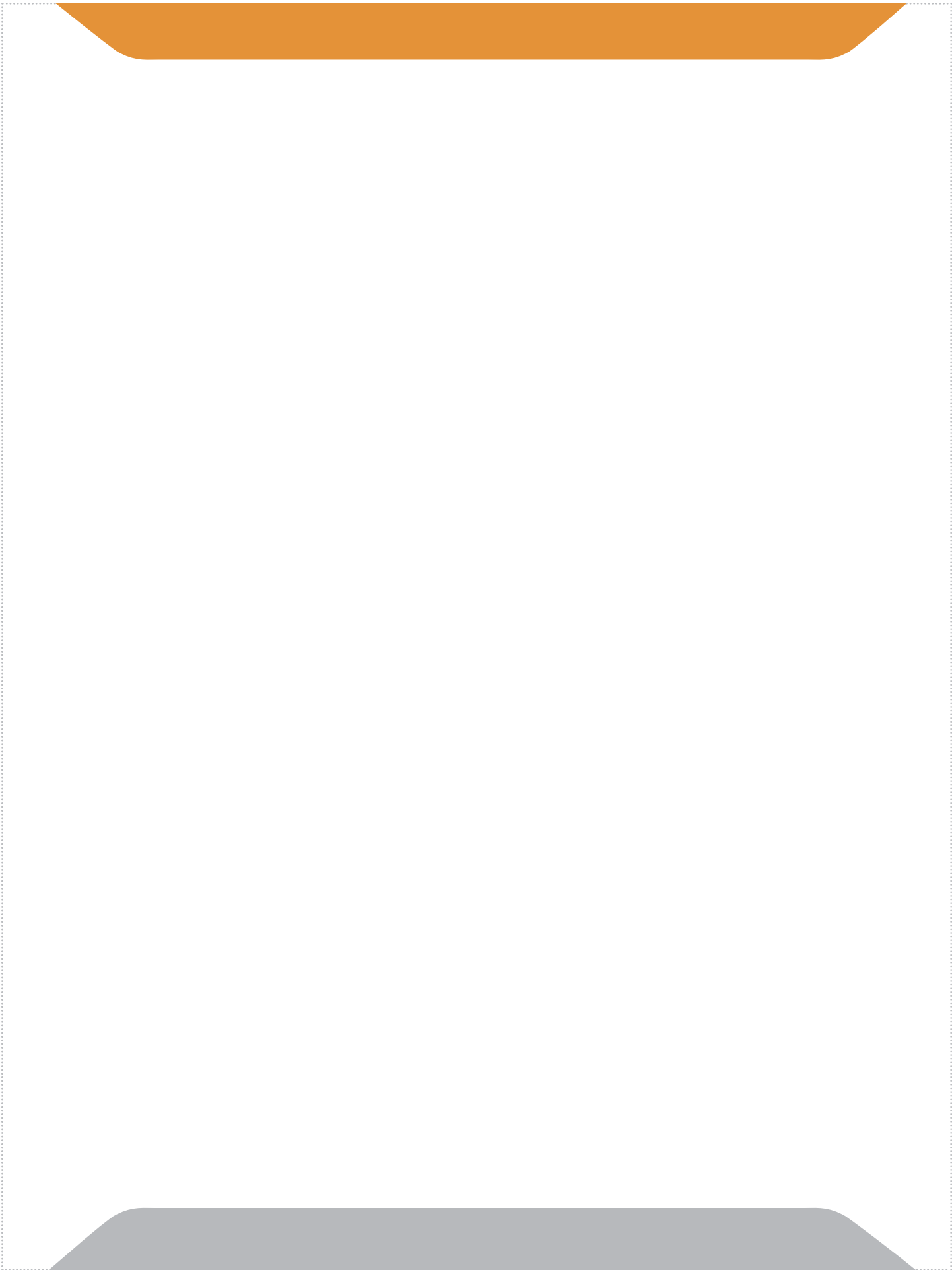
# Navigate the Future™

## "Transformational Leadership as Jazz"

Issue 4 - Volume 4  
Winter 2012



Executive Report on Leadership & Business Strategy





## In Our View ...

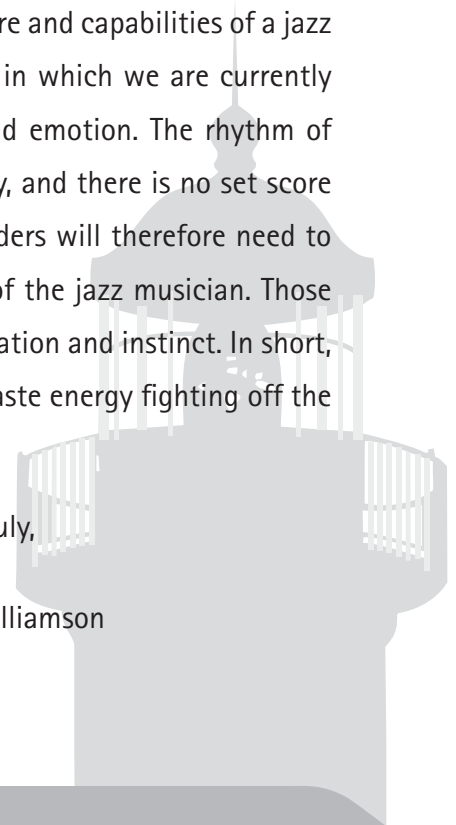
As we enter another new year, which promises to be just as full of challenges and opportunities as the previous one, it is time to rethink what it will take to lead the modern organization into the future. In our view, it will not take simply more of the same, it will take new and different. Radically new and radically different!

There is a good chance we have reached the "tipping point", which Malcolm Gladwell so eloquently spoke of in his book of the same name. The natural point at which we must pivot from one leadership system, which may have worked well enough in one set of circumstances, to another system better suited to today's environment. This is not some sort of doomsday scenario, or a knee jerk response to troubled times. It is a logical, rational and inevitable step we must take in order to adjust to some new realities.


In recent years, we have been suggesting the apt metaphor and appropriate model for the leadership style we desperately need parallels the nature and capabilities of a jazz musician. As we will try to explain, the external context in which we are currently expected to lead is one of chaos, noise, discontinuity and emotion. The rhythm of global business today is both unpredictable and disorderly, and there is no set score to help keep the musicians in "check". It seems to us, leaders will therefore need to master a new set of skills more closely related to those of the jazz musician. Those skills are based on a combination of imagination, improvisation and instinct. In short, they suggest an ability to go with the flow, rather than waste energy fighting off the forces of an uncertain environment.

Yours truly,

R. Douglas Williamson  
C.E.O.



## Becoming a Musician ...



We are not the first to be intrigued by the relationship between business leadership and jazz. The original honour fell to Max De Pree, the former Chairman and CEO of Herman Miller Inc., in his 1992 book "Leadership Jazz", but the more recent accolades should go to Professor Frank Barrett and his book "Yes to the Mess". These authors have done a far better job than we will be able to do in making the case for re-thinking organizational leadership, but we agree 100% with their essential premises.

Simply put - there is no way adding layer after layer of additional process, protocol and policy will help the modern leader make sense of, let alone tame, the external environment. Leaders who believe their leadership capability and bona fides should be measured by how well they build order and efficiency into their organizations are out of step with the current reality. They can try all they want to pursue that path, but it will only lead them to one place - oblivion!

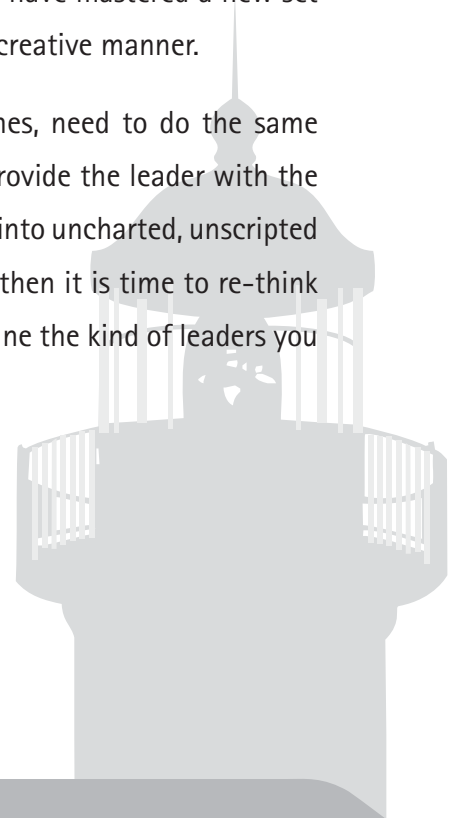
In today's world, it is not about enforcing more order and demanding greater efficiency, it is about achieving improved effectiveness and how well leaders are equipped to trust their intuition, navigate the craziness, and "go with the flow". In an environment of permanent ambiguity, rapid change, and wave after wave of massive dislocations, the leader cannot possibly use the toolkit designed in a far simpler, more predictable and less turbulent world. We need something radically new to replace the tired model of the past. We need more jazz musicians, not more process geeks, bureaucratic rule writers and compliance administrators.

## Freedom Through Abandonment ...


The surrender of old practices, mindsets and attitudes is tough stuff. Admittedly, it is hard to unlearn what we have believed and practiced for so long. The act of abandoning the supposed "safety" of what has worked in the past takes a monumental act of leadership courage. One explanation for this difficulty might lie in the very way in which the human brain works, and how easily we allow so many of our habits and behaviours to become automatism, or automatic, reflexive responses.

Jazz musicians, on the other hand, defy this tendency with every fiber of their being. They abhor routine and structure and, instead, commit themselves to a different set of core beliefs and practices which enable them to be more fluid, less rigid and less scripted. In the process, they liberate themselves. And, as a result of that self granted freedom, they are better able to "play" with musicians they may not even know, without the need for familiarity, process, or even the crutch of written music. In essence, they have cast off the rigid constraints that can fence us in, and have mastered a new set of skills which allow them to express themselves in a more creative manner.

Modern leaders, who want to be relevant in changing times, need to do the same thing. It is about building a new set of capabilities which provide the leader with the confidence and courage necessary to take their organization into uncharted, unscripted territory. Unless you believe we are going back to the past, then it is time to re-think the very way in which your organization is led, and re-examine the kind of leaders you need to help guide you forward.



## Creative Chaos and Collaboration ...



The great jazz masters have trained themselves, both mentally and physically, to thrive in circumstances which can best be defined as creative chaos. Rather than shying away from taking risks in expressing themselves fully and freely, in front of peers, and endlessly practicing set routines in order to get it "right", they have reframed the underlying premise from top to bottom. It is this same reframing we now need our organizational leaders to adopt, and the speed at which they are able to adjust might very well spell the difference between success and failure.

As radical as it may seem, leaders need to stop wasting their time and energy on getting their organizations more organized and, instead, spend their time teaching others how to become better improvisers and natural collaborators. In this process, they will have to overcome the longstanding bias that without control and order imposed from above, the people below will simply not be able to function and will, inevitably, dissolve into chaos. This is simply not the case, and to continue believing it shows the leader is outdated in both their thinking and their understanding of human nature.

To the jazz musician, "open source innovation", as Barrett has termed it, is the only way to allow yourself to grow, experiment, learn and improve in an environment that is ever changing, and in which people are coming and going at will. In other words, while the technically perfect, methodically tuned and alarmingly precise classical musicians may have been the best model for leaders to emulate in the past, those days are gone. While we did not have a choice in the timing nor the magnitude of the changes taking place all around us, we can change the way in which the music gets played.

## Improvisation as a Leadership Competency ...

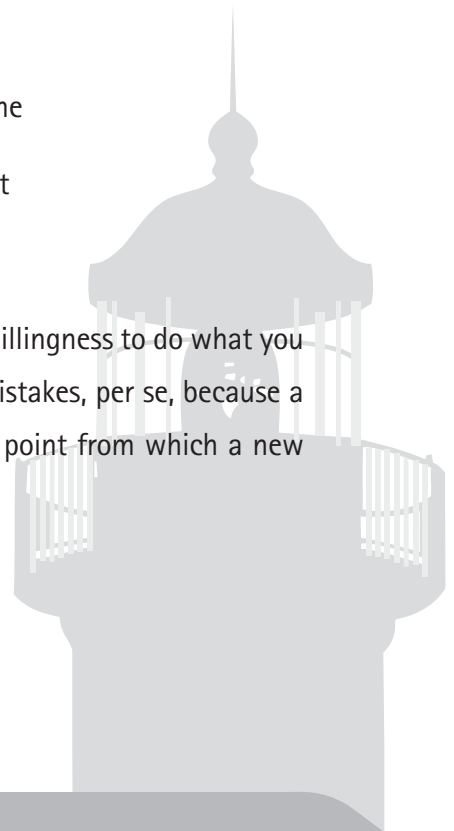
The principle difference between the classical masters of the past, and the jazz impresarios of the future, is the value and importance they place on improvisation as a necessary part of how you "make good music". Granting yourself, and your organization, permission to improvise is a huge gesture of liberation. It means both the leader, and their followers, relieve themselves of having to pursue the impossible and unnecessary goal of being perfect every time and, instead, grant themselves permission to try new things, and even fail in the process.

The great jazz musician knows the definitions of both "failure" and "perfection" are subject to considerable personal interpretation and, in the trade-off between freedom and constraint, they would far sooner choose freedom, in spite of the fact it carries certain obligations with it.


In order to take advantage of that switch in mindset, the jazz musician must make other kinds of tradeoffs. They understand the need to:

- allow the other musicians to take the lead, at any time
- be comfortable with not knowing what's coming next
- forgo rigid routine in favour of personal expression

In jazz there is not really any right or wrong, there is only a willingness to do what you can with what you have been given. In jazz, there are not mistakes, per se, because a mistake is seen as just another improvisational jumping off point from which a new pattern is allowed to flow.



## Mastering Dynamic Interplay ...



In the world of jazz, musicians learn how to master the dynamic shifts that can occur when you allow chaos and freedom to replace control and predictability. The musicians take their cues not from a formal, preset script, but rather from the sense they have of others. A jazz musician who is not willing to both enjoy and appreciate the idiosyncrasies of the other musicians will not be successful. In a world where more collaboration is demanded, it will be those who think like a jazz musician who will thrive.

The leaders we need to guide our organizations in the future cannot allow either themselves or their organization to rely upon "learned patterns", but rather to "jam" with others in an unregulated form of interplay. As Barrett said so well in his book "they require bricolage - fumbling around, experimenting and patching together an understanding of problems from bits and pieces of experience, improvising with the materials at hand".

In essence, the shift we are advocating is away from knowing, and more towards tinkering. It means coming to understand the modern organization as a "complex learning system", and that the learning never stops. As a result, the jazz musician is open to new opportunities, methods, beats and harmonies, and can live comfortably with allowing sense to be made in "reverse". In others words, to only be able to know and understand if things will work after the fact, not before.



## Deepening the Dialogue ...

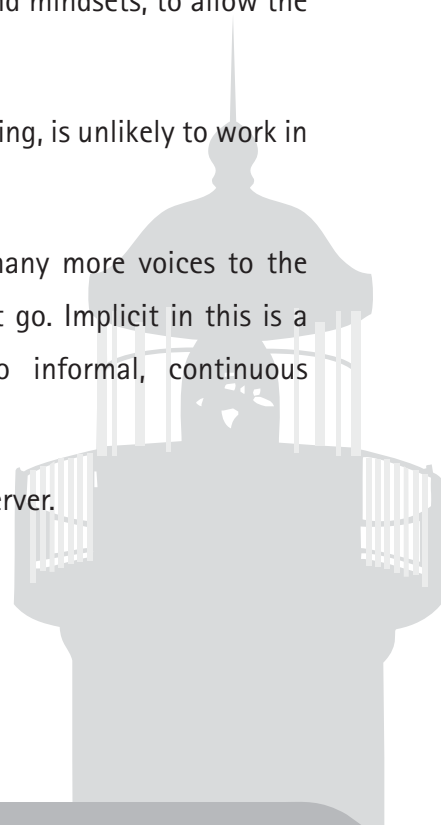
There is a school of thought which suggests jazz, at its very core, is an advanced and sophisticated form of dialogue. It is about stripping away the formality we find in structure and replacing it with a more fluid conversation, the direction of which we can neither control nor predict. The belief is that creative outcomes can only be generated within the heat, emotion and disorder of a group of people energetically and passionately engaged in the process of discovery. People do their best work when they are free from the fear of making mistakes or being wrong.

As a result, organizational leaders need to step back for a moment and consider a few very important questions.

- What do they really want from their organization, and their people, given the current climate?
- What changes must be made, to both structures and mindsets, to allow the organization to adapt successfully?
- What clues tell us the current approach is not working, is unlikely to work in the future, and needs to be changed?

The organization of the future must find ways to add many more voices to the mix, and must not be afraid of where the dialogue might go. Implicit in this is a shift from formal, infrequent, leader-led dialogue, to informal, continuous participant-led dialogue.

Dialogue that looks like a jazz ensemble to the casual observer.



## Disciplined Discovery ...

Fear is a debilitating emotion that can twist and contort leaders in ways they do not understand. It can impair judgment and distort perspective. Fear of the unknown, in particular, is one of the most concerning attitudes a leader can have in times like this. Leaders have to be able to tone down their egos, turn up their humility, and come to terms with the fact there is much, much more they do not know than they actually do know.

Jazz musicians approach each and every situation with an open mind and an attitude of experimentation and discovery. As a result, they cast off the self-imposed constraints that trap many business leaders, and put themselves in a much better position to embrace the opportunities and alternatives that simply emerge from the chaos. It really is a measure of confidence when a leader can suspend their need to know, and replace it with the joy of discovery.

At the same time, this shift allows the jazz musician to not feel trapped in any given situation, especially those that are unfamiliar. They understand that no matter how impossible or difficult things may look, there is an inevitable solution that will emerge, if they can only be patient, keep trying and go with the flow. As difficult as it may be for some leaders, the correct response is to relax and let go, not tense up and try to gain control.

## Chaos and Complexity ...

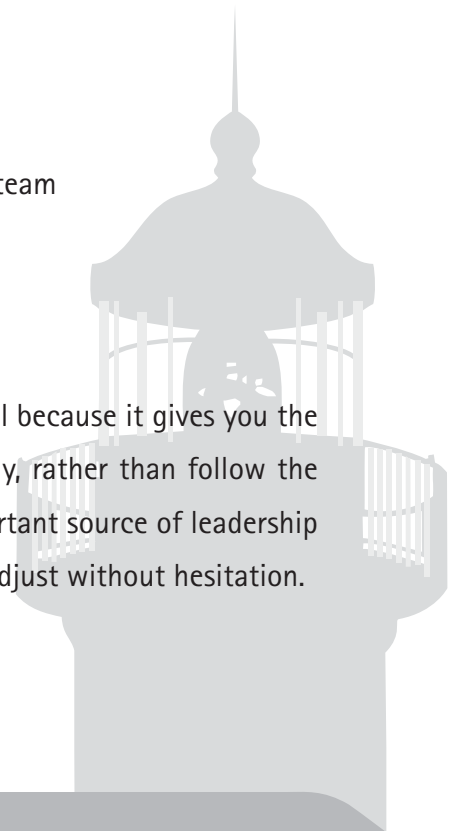
The world of business and business leadership is a challenging one. It can bring great rewards, if you succeed, and debilitating humiliation if you get it wrong. The traditional differences have been complicated even further, in the current environment, because the rules of the game have changed so significantly. It is simply inconceivable that leaders can carry on doing what they have done in the past, and continue to be successful. These are disruptive times and the advantage goes to the flexible, the adaptable and the resilient.

In times of chaos and complexity, the leader must adjust. When you do not and cannot know what lies ahead, you have to shift your thinking, and get comfortable with a new approach. In our view, the approach of the jazz musician is the most appropriate one because it places a higher value on an alternative set of priorities, the same ones that leaders would be well advised to entertain in the theatre of business.

These include:

- High levels of trust in the people around them
- A willingness to distribute leadership amongst the team
- Generous listening
- A willingness to pick up the beat and improvise

Choice has always been a more powerful asset than control because it gives you the freedom and opportunity to shape things in your own way, rather than follow the precedent set by others. It will become an even more important source of leadership strength in the future, because it allows organizations to adjust without hesitation.



## Steps to Take :: Actions to Consider

The leaders we need to help guide our organizations into the future need something from the rest of us. They need the freedom to act and serve in new and different ways, ways more suited to the times. The human spirit thrives on change and adaptation and, at regular intervals throughout history we have made great leaps forward. This is one of those times. In an environment that looks more like a crowded jazz bar than an ornate orchestra hall, we need leaders who can play jazz in the up tempo, improvisational manner in which it excels.

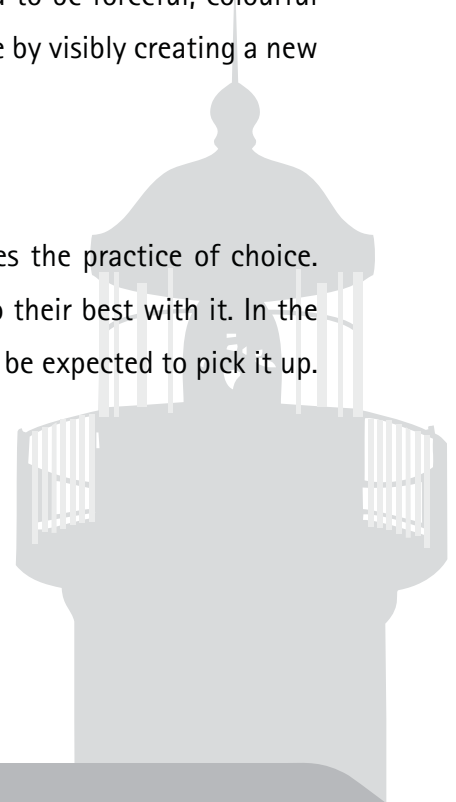
Here are some suggestions to get started.

### Change the Mood

The change will not be easy. The forces conspiring against a shift to jazz-style leadership will be huge. The leader will need to be forceful, colourful and passionate in making the case, and this is best done by visibly creating a new rhythm within the walls of the organization.

### Provide More Freedom

In the new world we are advocating, freedom becomes the practice of choice. People will be asked to accept that freedom, and to do their best with it. In the process, if the beat is dropped, others around them will be expected to pick it up.



## Banish Stifling Formality

Organizations, and the people within them, are literally choking to death, right in front of us, due to lack of oxygen. It's time to open the windows, and banish the rigidity which is working against the very kind of impromptu, flexible, opportunistic actions we need to take. There is no longer any value in imposing the monochromatic rules and policies that stifle originality and lead to conformity. In a world where no one knows the tune, we need organizations populated by those people who can make it up on the fly.

## Go with the Flow

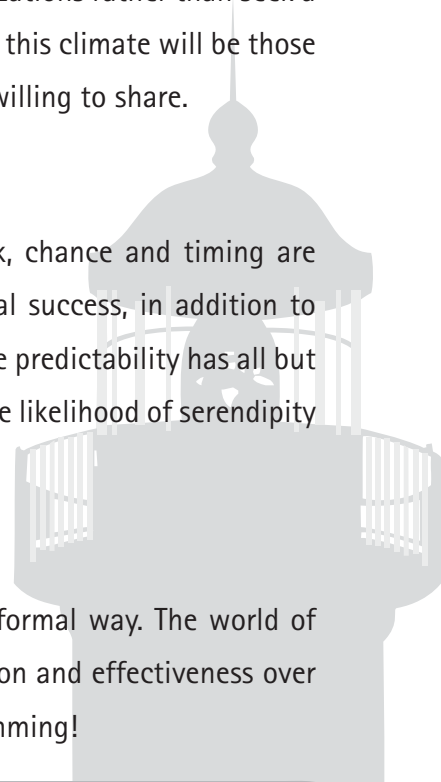
The organization of the future will be even more collaborative than it is today. At the same time, the workforce will be more diverse, and there will be more voluntary turnover, as people move in and out of organizations rather than seek a job for life. The people who will thrive and contribute in this climate will be those who can course correct, easily shift roles and who are willing to share.

## Leverage Serendipity

One of the natural laws of business is that good luck, chance and timing are all recognized as contributing factors to organizational success, in addition to good planning and executive brilliance. In a world where predictability has all but vanished, we need leaders who know how to improve the likelihood of serendipity calling at the door.

## Get Jamming

Jazz is passion, fun and hard work combined in an informal way. The world of business needs to move on and begin to value expression and effectiveness over efficiency, control and compliance. It's time to start jamming!





## The Beacon Group is ...

We are a Canadian-based professional services firm supporting clients throughout North America and around the world. We work with organizations in all sectors and industries in the development of their business strategies and in helping them leverage their investment in human capital.

Our goal is to support senior leadership teams in their efforts to:

**Optimize** - strategic positioning and market opportunities

**Maximize** - long-term organizational effectiveness

**Develop** - leadership competency and fitness

**Create** - superior levels of performance

Our practice is divided into four main areas of expertise:

Strategy | Culture | Talent | Leadership

When integrated, this broadly based expertise provides our clients with a comprehensive Organizational Health and Business Performance System.



## Our Core Values

*We believe* ... mindset, attitude, character and behaviour matter. It is vitally important to be clear, consistent and authentic. This is especially true when serving as a "trusted partner" to the organizations who work with us.

*We commit* ... in all aspects of our client relationships, to being:

*Progressive* - forward thinking, ambitious and pragmatically radical

*Thought Leaders* - innovative, audacious and imaginatively bold

*Passionate* - loving what we do and creating passion in others

*Customer Driven* - dedicated, involved and fully committed

*Responsive* - fast acting, intense and able to anticipate

*Agile* - enthusiastic, nimble, adaptive and courageous

## Our Approach

*We support* ... progressive leaders and ambitious organizations in developing relevant Business Performance and Human Capital strategies that have an immediate impact.

*We partner* ... with them to create and implement robust strategies, solid frameworks and pragmatic solutions, allowing them to lead with confidence and deliver results.

*We achieve* ... this through a commitment to:

*Providing* - a comprehensive, integrated set of organizational effectiveness tools

*Focusing* - on building customized solutions to meet performance challenges

*Supporting* - mission-driven leaders with their transformational agendas

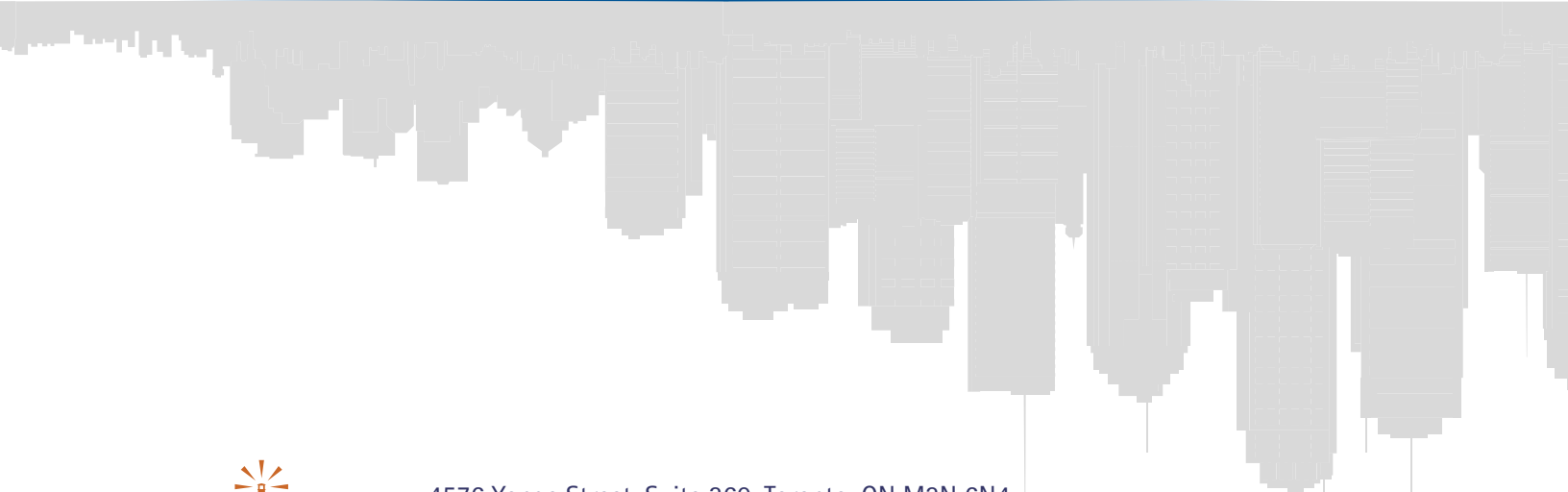
*Appealing* - to those with a pragmatic, no nonsense approach

*Executing* - our work with punch, panache and know-how

*Delivering* - results that make a difference



Strategy | Culture | Talent | Leadership



4576 Yonge Street, Suite 360, Toronto, ON M2N 6N4  
416.229.0605 | 866.240.3948 | [www.thebeacongroun.ca](http://www.thebeacongroun.ca)