

Jazz Up Your Team: Leadership Insights from Jazz Masters

INTERVIEW BY STEFANIE SMITH

Insights into leadership don't only come from business authorities. In a recent interview by executive coach/consultant Stefanie Smith, Eli Yamin, recognized as a great jazz pianist, composer and educator, shared his insights into evoking top creative performance from players, advice that isn't limited to the musical realm.

Yamin has played with jazz masters for decades, recorded numerous CDs, and was the musical director for the tour of *Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies* directed by Mercedes Ellington. Eli performs concerts and conducts workshops throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

Eli leads the Middle School Jazz Academy at Jazz at Lincoln Center, now in its third year. The program is the first of its kind.

Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis explains the passion behind the program: "The Middle School Jazz Academy reflects our vision that this music can be appreciated by audiences of all ages. For me it's important that the kids play, with an integrity and a belief in what they are playing."

Smith: Let's get right to the heart of the matter. What does a leader mean to members of a jazz ensemble?



Eli Yamin leads/conducts/directs The Middle School Jazz Ensemble.

Yamin: Jazz is a unique art form because leadership shifts around the group even though there is one music director. No matter what style or generation of jazz, there are always times when different musicians take prominence as the creative focal point. It's understood in our culture that other ensemble members rally around that new focal point and support his or her vision in that particular moment.

Smith: What does it mean for a leader to give up that focal point?

Yamin: Great jazz leaders have the flexibility and openness to integrate ideas coming from beneath them, above them, and around them. They allow room in their vision for other people's visions. This is one of the great legacies

of jazz that makes jazz so reflective of democratic values and the American culture and spirit.

Smith: There's organizational value there as well. Please share some leadership lessons you've learned from jazz masters you've played with or studied.

Yamin: I had the good fortune to play with Illinois Jacquet, one of the most famous jazz saxophonists of the '50s, who played with the Count Basie Orchestra.

Illinois Jacquet loved to rehearse. He would have the entire band, sixteen of us, practice for five or six hours. Maybe with a ten-minute break, maybe not. His style took endurance and patience.

He was rather dramatic sometimes. He liked to call people out and kind of mess with you. You never knew who was coming next. This is not necessarily a part of his style I want to emulate but it had its effect. It made us focus.

At a sound check, he would tune up the band, almost like a high school band director, one instrument at a time. He was dealing with professionals who'd been playing for 20, 30, 40 years. Yet he'd tune us up. I recognized over time it wasn't about tuning up the instruments. He was getting us to tune up our minds,

and that's very important to bringing unity to a group.

Reflecting now, I recognize his job was to get sixteen people to focus into the moment and share a commitment to the swing we were creating together. That's a big task with everybody thinking about their insurance payments or their cars not working right or whatever. To come into a room and say, "Okay, it's about this music right here, right now."

Now, Duke Ellington—a totally different story. I never knew him. But I think about him almost every day.

The creativity he brought out of his musicians was all in the music. He got to know players as individuals—what their soul wanted to say and what their heart had to express. He wrote parts particularly tailored for them. He didn't have to tell you, "I want it like this." You knew how to do it because that music was written just for you.

I know a drummer who played with Duke Ellington. When he first got with the band, he asked Duke, "How do you want me to play this number? Can I get a recording of how your other guy did it?" And Duke said, "No, I don't want you to hear the record. I want you to play it like you play it."

Smith: So from Illinois Jacquet we learn that rehearsing intensely as a group yields success. And you need to tune up and focus. Whereas from Duke Ellington we learn that success starts with individual talent and soul.

Yamin: Right.

Smith: How do you balance bringing out the best creativity in individuals

with maintaining cohesion and inspiring best performance from the team as a whole?

Yamin: You need to establish a shared sense of values. Leaders have to bring the maturity to step back and say, "This is not about me. This is about my vision." The best leaders stimulate a group chemistry where all players come together, are



Eli Yamin and Jazz at Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis.

checking in with and tuning themselves into a common purpose.

What's so inspiring here at Jazz at Lincoln Center is that Wynton Marsalis has articulated a vision for how jazz can be a force for positive change in American culture. It's up to each of us to find out how we can make an individual contribution to that effort.

Smith: How else do elements of jazz apply to working in teams?

Yamin: I recently did a workshop with a management professor at Fordham on how jazz can be a model for deepening your ability to manage, create, and work on autonomous flexible teams. The idea of more diffuse power structures has emerged as the new direction companies are pursuing.

This is exactly what we have in a jazz band. The bass player's got a certain role. The drummer's got a certain role. The piano, the horn players, they've all got roles. You've got a score that everybody's checking in with and you have a certain aesthetic approach, whether you want it to be swinging or bluesy or real aggressive or more laid back. So you have parameters, but everybody gets a chance to have their voice heard and have an impact on the overall sound of the group.

Smith: As a coach, I help professionals understand how they are truly exceptional. We need to know our strengths to feel and project confidence. How do you evoke that with your students and band members?

Yamin: I make sure to play all different kinds of songs and see which musicians resonate with which styles. Sometimes you can see in a personality "Oh, I

bet you that person is going to be good with a plunger mute, a Bubber Miley kind of Duke Ellington thing." Or, "This person has more of a Miles Davis kind of vibe so let's try something and see if it suits him."

It's important to notice who responds to what. Duke Ellington, my greatest hero, said, "I am the world's greatest listener." That is a key. To be a great leader is to be a great listener.

Smith: Eli, thank you for teaching us a little about jazz and a lot about leading.

Stefanie Smith speaks and moderates for academic and professional groups and is frequently quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* and other national newspapers. For more info: visit www.stratexconsulting.com

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