

THE FUTURE OF TEAMWORK: ORCHESTRA OR JAZZ?

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They say that teamwork is all about synchronization – multiple people working hand-in-hand and marching step-in-step to achieve a common goal. What rhythms do teams use to synchronize? Let's look at two different examples of teamwork – an orchestra and a jazz performance.

By getting a large number of musicians to play together in an orchestra, live performances could be brought to larger audiences. Of course, this kind of teamwork needed an orchestrator or conductor, who could centrally control the entire performance and provide cues to the musicians to stay in sync.

A jazz performance however, embodies a completely different kind of teamwork. Here, multiple musicians come together to play in concert, however, they do not depend on any external cues to synchronize with each other - they react to each other and improvise accordingly, while retaining their originality and spontaneity. Every jazz performance therefore is unique.

An orchestra works on what we may call an *artificial rhythm*, external to the actual activity in question, similar to the marching beat of a military drill or parade. The fundamental objective of these rhythms is clockwork timing, precision and certainty. Synchronized swimming, musical orchestra, working of metal in a smithy etc. come to mind as examples of teamwork co-ordinated by artificial rhythms.

A jazz performance, on the other hand follows what we may call a *natural rhythm*, internal and integral to the activity in question and capable of ebbing and flowing on the fly. The fundamental objective of such a rhythm is continuous improvisation and of course, creative playfulness and fun. Soccer, theatre and open-source software development come to mind as examples of teamwork guided by natural rhythms.

We can expect that different kinds of work would need different rhythms, without having to deem one superior to another. By the same token, one would expect that in every enterprise, we should see ample evidence of both these rhythms in action.

It is therefore surprising to observe the pre-eminence of artificial rhythms in the industrial world! Teamwork, in enterprises today, is mostly driven by a hierarchical management structure. At each layer, managers function as central conductors of work orchestras, determining the distribution and pace of work. There are also enterprise-wide processes, rules and regulations that drive work rhythms. New recruits gradually evolve into seasoned professionals by reigning in chaotic creativity and bringing in discipline.

The near absence of “jazz” type of teamwork might owe itself to the following:

- 1. Most of the work (and teamwork) in today's industrial world needs certainty, predictability and precision more than adaptation and elegance.**
- 2. The fear of loss of control makes it difficult for teams to move from artificial to natural rhythms.**

This imbalance is likely to change in the new world. Thanks to the internet, information is no longer the preserve of a few institutions, resulting in an extraordinary empowerment of every individual across the planet. Simultaneously, never before in the history of mankind has the world been as connected as it is today. It's a paradoxical world of extreme connectedness and fierce independence. People are increasingly getting together using online social networks to form personal interest teams, evangelist groups, setup businesses online and even create mass social movements! It is not too far-fetched to expect that empowered individuals will expect similar freedom for creative expression and collaborative work in the enterprises where they work.

- *For several decades now, teams on the Toyota factory floor have been synchronizing with the rate of dynamic customer demand (Takt time) rather than the rate of supply (production capacity) work. Every work activity is designed as an opportunity for learning and improvement.*
- *The open source and agile software development movements have proven that even decentralized, dynamic teams can work productively and efficiently through a series of short-cycle iterations and improvisation to create great products.*
- *Companies such as 3M have very successfully used the concept of assembling dynamic multi-functional Lead User teams for collaborative solution design.*

As Thomas Friedman so potently discusses in *The Lexus And the Olive Tree*, the defining characteristic of the new world is speed, not weight. Continued success needs innovation, collaboration, adaptation, improvisation and evolution. Will new world teams choose orchestra or jazz? ***My bets are on jazz!***

About the Author



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