

**Sheila**  
**Stokes White**

## **All that jazz**

**A workshop using music as a metaphor for culture change**

## Abstract

This paper describes an innovative approach to organisation development using music as a metaphor. This was inspired by a sense that conventional interventions, whilst successful, were not producing major breakthrough quickly. The step change involved in this approach brought both and long lasting culture change. In addition the process of going through the experience together created enormous synergy and sense of one culture – almost effortlessly. The work was with 200 senior managers from a local authority in the North East of England. A workshop was subsequently presented to the *Annual Conference of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council* in Dublin in November 2010.

## 1 Introduction

1.1 In 2010 in the UK change and uncertainty were encountered everywhere. The question which this poses to organisations offering improvement services to clients is “How can we as thought leaders, mentors and coaches offer our clients the tools they will need to equip themselves for the challenges they face? “ Alongside this change has been an evolution - the world has returned to its roots. The target driven mentality has been replaced with localism, creativity, flexibility and self responsibility. Everywhere there are signs of green shoots of hope about a return to sanity – a greater trust in people and the importance of their relationships with each other, their sensitivity and creativity, their values and aspirations.

1.2 Sheila Stokes White had been working with a local authority on their organisational development challenges. They employ approximately 10,000 staff and are a unitary authority in the North East of England. They have always been a high performing authority but with the economic recession and the public sector turbulence, it was clear that the speed with which they delivered their services needed addressing as a matter of urgency. An inspection also made clear that a key issue for them was that of pace. The organisation needed to work faster, smarter and become leaner.

1.3 They wanted an innovative creative event for 200 of their most senior managers to help them work faster, smarter and become leaner. This organisation had always embraced the arts, culture, and creativity in their working culture but now decided to use the same approach to the development of their own staff. They chose innovation to tackle their major challenging agenda – transformation of their whole organisation in order to accelerate the pace of change and deal with a harsh financial climate, whilst motivating and enthusing their staff. It was decided to use the bi annual strategic development event for their 200 senior managers as the focus for an innovative creative event

1.4 Sheila Stokes White suggested using music as a metaphor for organisational change. With music the way it used to be shared and learned everyone is a soloist as well as part of the whole and allows people a different way of working together. The process of learning together is part of the learning. There is no one person in overall leadership. It also has to be done quickly, in the moment, often at speed and intuitively picking up the thoughts and ideas of others without words being spoken or music written down.

1.5 Sheila suggested an enjoyable but very practical event to focus on key areas and drive forward relevant actions. Although the council’s performance in many areas was high there was a view that complacency was apparent and an over reliance on the goodwill and commitment of staff. More celebration of success was needed both internally and externally.

1.6 The Council had developed a strategic plan which embodied their vision for the future. Key to success of this would be an energetic and enthusiastic commitment by senior managers to this process. A crucial issue is the need to convince highly motivated staff that the organisation is keen to

use their potential and their creative ideas, though history and culture is making this a very slow process. The Council faced significant financial challenges and relentless pressure to make efficiency savings into the future. They needed to:

- Accelerate the pace of change in both decision making and delivery
- Raise their profile in order to share good practice and influence regional development
- Explore options for dealing with a potentially harsh financial climate
- Develop new business models to provide solutions and options for the future

1.7 For these reasons Sheila felt that music should be used as an integral part of the event.- music as a metaphor for leadership and organisation change. The objective would be to create one organisation of people who are energetic and enthused and who are committed to helping to shape the corporate vision of the Council and to own the corporate direction. This use of music as a metaphor for leadership has been very successful in stretching the thinking of managers to shift their mindset seeing leadership through a musical lens as innovation, collaboration and flexibility creating a democratic fast moving culture away from a traditional command and control role.

## 2 Outcomes they wanted

- **Finance** - Explore options for dealing with a potentially harsh financial climate
- **Pace** - Accelerate the pace of change in both decision making and delivery
- **Judgement** - Clarify priorities and standards
- **Leadership and ownership** Motivate and enthuse staff throughout the organisation

## 3 The Event

3.1 The venue was a purpose built theatre dating back to the 1920s originally set up by a local theatre group and a testament to the way in which a community can create and manage a community resource for itself. Performances are amateur productions and are sell outs - the theatre has been continuously maintained since the 1920s and remains a key resource.

3.2 Paramount to the success of the event was the choice of musician. We were extremely fortunate to secure the services of Pete Churchill who is Professor of Jazz Composition at the Royal Academy of Music. A world renowned, arranger, singer and educator much in demand at international festivals and events, he has enormous skill in enabling others learning. (see Pete's bio at end of article)

## 4 How we did it

4.1 Sheila Stokes White facilitated the event. The music session which formed the centrepiece was done in the theatre auditorium facilitated by Pete Churchill who introduced an interactive experiential session using a process learning a song as a group. Pete introduced the concept and explained the theory behind the use of music. He explained that Jazz is not simply a style, it's not 'the' music, it's what you do to the music. It's an attitude, it's a way that you approach things and improvise. He drew on the historic community way of learning compared to notational methods and used call and response to introduce the concept in an inclusive way. He used the piano and sang to demonstrate actively what he wanted delegates to do. This created a feel of interest and energy and got people talking. The 200 delegates sat in the auditorium of the theatre not taking notes but simply listening and repeating what they heard, they were taught a song with movement which they performed in harmony by the end of the morning – 2 hours later.

4.2 The song "It's a Hard Road to Travel" by Jimmy Cliff – also mirrored the challenges they faced and modelled their own situation. Many delegates had lacked confidence about their singing but evaluation of the event showed an amazing and overwhelming outpouring of enthusiasm for what had been experienced and learnt in such a short time.

4.3 At the end of Pete's session, we facilitated a feedback opportunity using the music they had learnt and what this had shown them and what they could take away from it. There were a number of key points which were useful in identifying what had been experienced and what could be used so we considered

- what they had learnt;
- how they could take it forward;
- How they could take greater personal responsibility;
- How they could improve by working together in different ways.

## 5 Why use music?

5.1 The workshop was designed to be a model for collaboration and team building. Pete Churchill taught the delegates to sing a song together in unison, then in harmony and to reflect on what they had learned as a result. He explained the way in which music had evolved over the years from a community people-centred oral tradition to a classical formal written tradition so that now music is most normally learnt from written music which was a concept developed by the Catholic church. In the oral tradition, in cultures all round the world music was handed down from generation to generation and was played and sung by the community. Learning was by listening and repeating and an enormous range of music was passed on in this way. To some extent western society has lost this facility or devalues it. The point about learning in this way is that the learning process itself is a significant one for building a community or team and developing a common understanding and a shared experience which can then be transferred to other work.

5.2 Music can be used to teach people to be more flexible and innovative in their working practice. Quite simply, music is a metaphor for organisational dynamics, and can be used to teach and inspire in ways that go deeper than the usual training seminar or keynote speech, focusing on why improvisation is critical for an organisation. We turn the employees in the audience into participants to give the experience context. Music introduces a dynamic vocabulary to organisations to inspire new thinking about leadership and management and for discussing teamwork, creativity and personal development, inviting participants to explore new ways of thinking about business practice.

5.3 Music and business depend on creativity, agility, empathy and flexibility. The similarities do not end there. Lessons can be learned about multi-tasking, cross-functional awareness, innovation and responsiveness to change. Music offers practical insights into organisational dynamics and hands-on interaction to improve an organisation's response to change. Good music, like good business, nurtures an environment that honours 'mistakes' by trying to work them into the vision, to see where they might fit, and discovering how to make sense of them. The music is a powerful tool for building such an environment in the seminar. It gets people loosened up and excited. It builds community, bringing out the audience's passion: new energy, new ways to listen to each other, new creativity, new collaborative skills and a new approach to leadership.

5.4 The distinction is the difference between making decisions from one's personal point of view and being aware that any decision you make, from the smallest to the most consequential, will immediately affect the complex, ever-changing web of dynamic relationships that comprise the modern organisation. For both the jazz ensemble and the business enterprise, successful 'sense-making' means responding to change the innovation.

5.5 Jazz is an attitude – a process which can be applied in an organisation. It can drive new ways of working. Evaluations from the event we ran for Gateshead Council showed the enthusiasm and energy generated by working in this way. Pete will explain how music notation changed the way we communicated with each other. The evolution of music was away from learning together as a

community using intuition – a speedy process – towards written and annotated music has formalised and to some extent destroyed one of our key human means of communication.

5.6 Jazz provides an opportunity to draw distinctions between the bureaucratic world of organisations and the creative thinking organisations. The reasons for this include that the instruments of the orchestra and the orchestra and, indeed, classical music generally have been codified and notated so that learning is done through written music which is then interpreted by the conductor who acts as leader with the various parts of the orchestra forming small teams. This can thus be seen as an organisational chart of a bureaucratic kind. In a jazz ensemble every player is a soloist as well as part of the ensemble and the music is picked up by individual soloists and jammed. This is expected and encouraged by all members of the group and allows a different way of working together. There is no one person in overall leadership. It also has to be done quickly in the moment often at speed and intuitively picking up the thoughts and ideas of other members of the ensemble without words being spoken or music written down.

5.7 Sheila and Pete used learning a song in order to:

- Explore language, melody, rhythm, volume, tempo, intensity, tension and resolution, movement
- Explore the concepts of rehearsal and performance – are they different or the same?
- Explore the process of learning like this and what it tells us about our work and current practices?
- Explore working in one whole group as the idea of one organisation working in harmony together is the most important learning for delegates to take away
- Exploring the movement, articulation, sound and the meaning, an introduction based on harmony, the groove and the vibe, the micro and the macro .

## **6 How successful was it?**

It achieved a major breakthrough in that all who attended reported a greater sense of ownership of the issues they faced; a greater sense of belonging to one organisation, a greater sense of team culture and an understanding that as senior players they had a leadership responsibility. The vividness of the experience had the effect of shining a clear light on the financial challenge which they faced and the need to accelerate the pace of change. Overwhelmingly they understood the bigger picture, both for their organisation but also on the national stage, and their own place within it.

### **Reference:**

Zander B & Zander RS 2002 Penguin Books THE ART OF POSSIBILITY

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## **About the presenters**

### **Sheila Stokes White**

Sheila has been a strategic adviser to central and local government and a non executive director of an NHS Trust. Sheila inspires trust and confidence in her clients providing them with clarity, vision and insight whilst offering support and challenge. An experienced probation officer, Sheila became a chief officer in the service and had special training from the Tavistock Institute in London and at University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology. She works with top players on leadership, transformation and innovation. She also works with complex multi agency partnerships across the country helping bring clarity and focus using a combination of 1-2-1 mentoring and OD interventions including Appreciative Inquiry. Sheila's strengths lie in leadership and her great skill is in harnessing commitment, passion and drive in those with whom she works and she enjoys the challenge of creating transformative opportunities during times of turbulence and uncertainty. A trained singer, she found the concepts explored by Benjamin and Rosamund Stone Zander in their book - the Art of Possibility - fascinating and began introducing more innovative approaches to the organisation development work of the company. The use of music as a metaphor for organisational change was an intriguing one and its success was more than endorsed by the work which this paper explores.

### **Pete Churchill**

Pete Churchill has been working as a composer, pianist, singer and teacher for twenty years. Originally trained in Canada he has been based in England since 1985 and taught for several years at the University of Newcastle. Recently completing almost twenty years teaching at the Guildhall School of Music Pete is now Professor of Jazz Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Pete is recognised as being at the forefront of Jazz education in this country - recently receiving the 2007 Parliamentary Award for Services to Jazz Education. He has worked with government departments as well as work with Primary schools all over the country. He has regularly taken up to a thousand children to the Albert Hall to perform his specially commissioned 'Groove' Oratorios combining Primary school choirs with Youth Orchestras inviting guest soloists from the worlds of Jazz and Musical Theatre.

As an educator Pete is very much in demand abroad - teaching regularly in Australia (Perth, Sydney, Melbourne), including a spell as visiting Professor at the Kodaly Summer School at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. He has given Jazz workshops for the ABRSM in the Far East (Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore) and closer to home he has been a guest lecturer at the Sibelius Academy in Finland. albums), European Jazz Festivals as a vocalist, pianist and conductor, almost a decade and a half as the British accompanist for the legendary jazz-singer Mark Murphy and scoring big-band arrangements for Will Young and the Pop-Idols.