

Tuning in to organizational innovation - music as a metaphor to understand the improvisational field in organizations

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Abstract: What allows today's companies and organizations to be innovative in a complex world? How can we disclose the secrets of an innovative culture in organizations? We argue that musical language and a technology of improvisation can play a major role as an innovative approach to meet today's challenges in organizing complex processes. The paper gives a definition of "improvisation" and describes the concept of the "improvisational field" which are requirements for research on a technology of improvisation. The connection between music, organization and improvisation is constructed by the detection of improvisational "patterns" in organizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many have tried to understand why some organizations are innovative and creative and manage to adapt to today's complexity while others are not. As organizations face increasing uncertainty and complexity, they will need to invent solutions to problems which cannot be anticipated - or even imagined - in advance. In this climate, new knowledge and insight will be created and shared through new types of conversations. These new conversations will need to be deeply creative - as much as the kind of collaborative conversations artists have as they work together. One of the most complex kinds of artistic conversations are musical conversations; the spontaneous and yet highly skilled and present improvisations between musicians.

Our research project "Music_Innovation_Corporate Culture" (www.micc-project.org) – being part of a research cluster on "Innovations Strategies Beyond Traditional Management" funded by the German Government - tries to use new knowledge for the process of organizing (Weick, 1987) in companies, organizational networks and innovative collaborative processes. In our quest to disclose the secret of innovative organizational cultures we try to identify the patterns of innovative cultures by linking organizational settings by using musical thinking and the patterns of improvisation.

2. THE IMPROVISATIONAL FIELD

Complexity and turbulence are the keywords for the contemporary world we live in: organizational situations constitute a net of superposed timelayers and contingent, sudden aggregations of communication. The economy of production and organisational technologies unfolds in a texture of cooperation of diverse models of partnership from

the small cell team to the strategic alliances of organisations. An organizational situation has emerged in which the tentative and the provisory becomes the status quo. Thus, the inventive production of improvisation becomes a norm in itself: challenge and possibility.

Improvisation etymologically descends from the Latin "improvisus", which means unforeseen, unexpected. The term improvisation belongs to the realm of what-is-not-yet. Thus improvisation cannot be described itself, but can be localized as a continuous readiness and an ability to improvise. Everything else will come out of the situations and their processes. Field, network, variation principles, are the categories of action on fluid ground. To improvise in situations of ambiguity, alertness and presence become key features. Moderation becomes the model of governing teams and situations. Improvisation positions itself as a technology that takes into account the agreement, the actual state and the autobiographic characteristics of the individual in a group process.

Improvisation does not differentiate between thinking and acting, but intensifies the movement between the systems of the body. Improvisation therefore acts as a controlling system in the navigation between the difference of intersubjective openness and solipsistic moments of subjectivity. Then, intellectual work, social experience and practical-intuitive competence is converging – as is the difference between the individual and the collective in social systems, and the difference between the past and the future in time (Scharmer, 2009). If improvisation acts in a mode of permanent crisis, in the mode of permanent decision-making, we haven't defined how the decisions come about. Here the abilities come into play that empower us to judge. Hannah Arendt lays out, that the power of judgement is connected with the sensus

communis, with the community as the site that allows us to develop and discuss: critique becomes an open system. So the power of judgment develops its criteria and scale out of the public sphere of negotiation. Improvisation in contemporary societies is power of judgement in real-time.

3. IMPROVISATION TECHNOLOGY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Research on a technology of improvisation, while using knowledge from the performing arts (especially jazz and new music, but also from modern forms of theatre and dance), develops practical tools for innovation processes in organisations and social systems. By testing and researching it opens up new models of improvisation. While taking into account the fact that improvisation practise enables us to navigate through the new organizational spaces which are

characterised by new dimensions of abrupt change, uncertainty and insecurity, the organization then becomes a transit place, choreographed by a huge, complex variety of rhythms in which we navigate and perform at the same time.

Originally, the term improvisation was used to describe a stage of repairing situations, to correct in a sloppy way what went wrong. Although improvisation was inherently associated with flexibility and mobility, it was only ever meant to be in temporary use. Now the situation seems to shift: complex social space takes on the qualities of permanent improvisation. The lifestyle of transition and transformation becomes one of the key features of the everyday life. Therefore, organizational patterns also, originally being exemplars of linear planning, decision making and evaluation, have to adapt to a situation of complexity and awareness and towards the art (or technology) of improvisation.

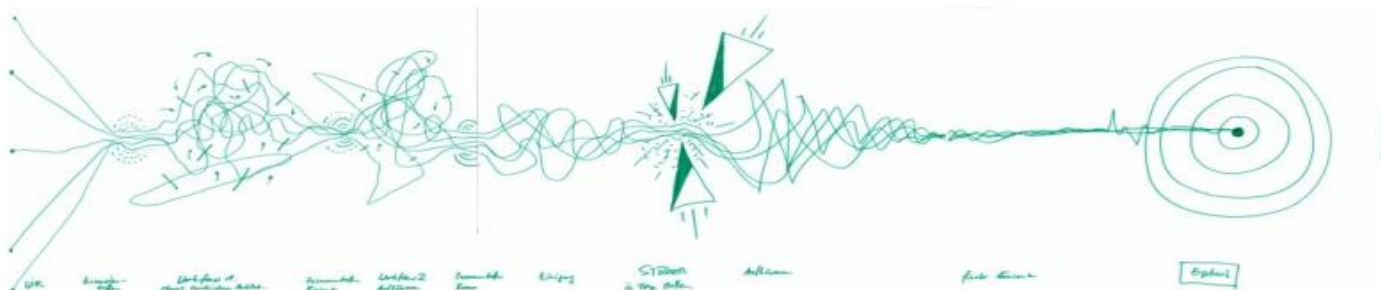


Fig1. Organizational Score as a musical script of a work-in-progress

4. PATTERN MINING WITHIN THE IMPROVISATIONAL FIELD OF ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to traditional social science methods like interviews, the MICC-project elaborated on two specific methods in order to detect improvisational patterns in organizations: the Musical Learning Journey develops a format of a “conversational performance”, in which a Jazz Combo as part of the project will try to grasp the artefacts and basic values of an organizational culture, transform it into a musical performance as a basis for a cultural discourse on a specific organization. This is to open peoples mind for musical thought as an alternative way of organizing.

As a second step people in organizations will develop musical notations (scores) of their organization/department/work in progress, based on the idea of new way of musical thought known as “New Music”: the scores show the lay-out of a graphic notation which is coming to life via the performance (acting) instead of the interpretation of a given piece of music.

Here, in the process of the performance, while acting, the sound will emerge as part of a joint creation (not interpretation) of reality.

In this way, the non-representational notational drafts of the New Music precisely thematize the relationships between design, recording, repetition, interpretation, reproduction and improvisation. In connexion with organization studies and analysis, our goal is to research a range of topics developing in parallel, which investigate the transposition of the temporality of artistic processes and methods of communication. In artistic modes of production, notation takes on new meanings, or functions as a working tool that alters the form of art itself, as well as the way it is made and reflected. It is therefore important for us that notation in New Music is understood in its essential aspect, the creative act.

What does this mean for the conception of the organization? We begin from the basic assumption that representational expressive forms as notations and conceptions are no longer adequate to discover how organization functions.

Contemporary forms of organization begin to explode, because their movements have already exploded. Therefore we suggest that a focus on the figurative object of organization is no longer helpful in this respect. Rather, it is much more helpful to focus on the process of organization, and, by using artistic processes and modes of communication, try to analyze patterns of the improvisational field in organizations. Today, “production is immediately consumption and recording process (*Enregistrement*), without mediation. The recording process and consumption accord directly with production, although they do so within

the production process itself. Hence everything is production” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009).

The structures to be revealed only make sense when shown in their functioning, for they are either representations or the bearers of relationships of people (Weick, 1987). The diagrams of the organization are not directly representative. Rather, they are the bearers of relationships and the distributors of agents.

In this respect the interdisciplinary set-up of MICC is not intended to interpret the organization as music but has rather to be seen as an exercise to introduce musical thought (whereby thought is not to be reduced to mere cognitive processes but to a conceptual embodiment) into the analysis of the organization as performative process.

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