

“Improvisation and Transformation: Yes to the Mess”

(For **Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation**)

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Abstract

The field of organizational change has chiefly been studied from a teleological perspective. Most models of change emphasize action that is rational and goal oriented. What often gets overlooked and under theorized is the continuous, iterative nature of organizational life, the unplanned and serendipitous actions by and between people that lead to new discoveries and innovation. Recent research on organizational improvisation seeks to explore this area. In this chapter we will address two questions – what is the experience of improvisation and what are the conditions that support improvisation to flourish in organizations?

In the first part of this paper we look at the phenomenology of improvisation, the actual lived experience of those who improvise in the face of the unknown or in the midst of chaotic conditions. We will explore the strategies that some professional improvisers employ to deliberately create the improvisatory moment. We will then look at the dynamics of organizational life and explore the cultural beliefs, organizational structures and leadership practices that support improvisation. We will draw primarily upon the model from Barrett (2012) that focuses on the how the nature of jazz improvisation and the factors that support improvisation can be transferred to leadership activities. This

falls in the tradition of others who draw upon arts based metaphors, including jazz music and theatrical improvisation, to suggest insights for leadership and ways of organizing.

Since this is a book devoted to individual transformation as well as organizational transformation, we will also touch on the topic of how improvisation is a developmental project and explore the potential for improvisation to lead to personal transformation. We will attempt to move back and forth between both themes – organizational and personal transformation. Ultimately the two topics are not separate. Any significant organizational transformation begins with an improvisation. And any meaningful improvisatory move by a person is a potentially a moment of self-discovery and an identity-shaping event.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, improvisation has moved from fringe exploration into mainstream organizational literature. Initially viewed as a dysfunctional phenomenon, improvisation later was considered a beneficial – if subversive – practice, then intentional strategy. Study of organizational improvisation has appeared across diverse disciplines, including organizational innovation (e.g., Barrett, 1998, 2012; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998), change management and technology change (e.g., Effah & Abbeyquaye, 2014; Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997), creativity (Fisher & Amabile, 2009), and organizational learning (Miner, Bassof, & Moorman, 2001; Vendelo, 2009). Organizational improvisation also appears in the new product development, project management, and organizational adaptation and renewal literatures (e.g., Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995; Leybourne, 2009; Crossan, Lane, White, & Klus, 1996).

Organizational scholars have shown that improvisational culture, structures and processes can proactively create change and innovation in response to internal and external triggers (e.g., Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Charles & Dawson, 2011; Ford, 2008; Orlikowski & Hofman, 1997). Improvisation now has attention as a valuable strategy (Cunha et al., 2014; Hadida & Tarvainen, 2014) with attention focused on how to do it well (Vera & Crossan, 2005; Vera, Nemanich, Velez-Castrillon, & Werner, 2014). Following Montouri (2003), improvisation is the existential, phenomenological experience of living in a complex world.

Some scholars argue there are untapped insights for organizational improvisation available through consideration of theater improvisation and jazz (Kamoche et al., 2003; Weick, 1998). Without full understanding of improvisation in contexts designed for its success, they warn, scholars run the risk of “grafting” aspects of improvisation, which is inherently change-oriented, onto traditional organizational concepts designed to explain order (Weick, 1998).

The literatures on theater improvisation and jazz also have the advantage of making process transparent so that the act of creating, rather than merely the final product, is focal. Looking at the process of improvisation, including the fits and starts, the

corrections, and retrospective sense making, gives us a fresh view into the process of transformation.

The Experience of Improvisation

The Draw of Routines

Routines are useful on both the organizational and individual level. The sociologist Robert Merton (1940) outlined how modern bureaucratic organizations rely upon routines in order to function. Building on Max Weber, Merton writes that modern organizations are formal, rationally organized structures with clearly defined patterns of activity that serve to realize a previously defined function.

Formality is manifested by means of a more or less complicated social ritual which symbolizes and supports the ‘pecking order’ of the various offices. Such formality, which is integrated with the distribution of authority within the system, seeks to minimize friction by largely restricting (official) contact to modes which are previously defined by the rules of the organization. Ready calculability of others’ behavior and a stable set of mutual expectations is thus built up. Moreover, formality facilitates the interaction of the occupants of offices despite their (possibly hostile) private attitudes toward one another. . . . specific procedural devices foster objectivity and restrain the ‘quick passage of impulse into action (Merton, 1940, p. 560).

Restraining the “quick passage of impulse into action” is a way of saying that formal structures in modern bureaucracies seek to drive out improvisation. What they gain in predictability and reliability they give up in “on the spot” responsiveness. Over time no wonder certain individuals develop what Merton called the “bureaucratic personality,” accustomed to closing out parts of experience that do not fit ready-made categories, the tendency to develop stereotyped behaviors that do not adapt to the exigencies of changing contexts. Over time it becomes increasingly appealing to shut out parts of the world for which a ready-made skillful response is not available. Such maladaptive responses can lead to what Veblen called “trained incapacity” (in Burke, 1984).

So maladaptive responses and loyalty to outworn routines can impede organizational learning. Further, reliance on routines may be impossible as organizations embrace post-bureaucratic structures, in which “systems are interdependent across firm boundaries, performance is disembodied from ownership of assets, production and communication change rapid” (Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006, p. 22). A post-bureaucratic world prioritizes uncertainty, speed, adaptation, rendering futile the bureaucratic search for predictability and routine.

But what about the effect on individuals? What is the cost to the individual who feels comfortable living in securely routinized structures? Here we turn to a 19th century philosopher who noticed the trends in modernity, specifically the temptation to live

predictable lives of conformity. Soren Kierkegaard was alarmed by those who live lives of conformity and develop a compulsive rigidity that blocks off parts of reality. Such people are too fearful to be open to the possibilities of experience. This is the “immediate man,” (sic) the one whose life is marked by automatic and uncritical conformity. As they avoid their own uniqueness and interiority they live inauthentic lives:

the immediate man . . . his self or he himself is a something included along with “the other” in the compass of the temporal and the worldly. . . . Thus the self coheres immediately with “the other,” wishing, desiring, enjoying, etc., but passively; . . . he manages to imitate the other noting how they manage to live, and so he too lives after a sort. In Christendom he too is a Christian, goes to church every Sunday, hears and understands the parson, yea, they understand one another; he dies; the parson introduces him into eternity for the price of \$10 – but a self he was not, and a self he did not become . . . For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, . . . he recognizes that he was a self only by externals (Kierkegaard, 1849/1954, p. 184).

The immediate man, like the bureaucratic personality, is securely embedded in triviality, lives safely within the security of social rules, is lulled by daily routines, is threatened by anxiety of alternatives, and develops a compulsive character. This person is sheltered by necessity and becomes a slave to conformity by living safely within the predictability of social rules. By failing to cultivate their own interior life, they lose their own uniqueness, the genuine mystery at the heart of who they are, the authentic emotions and yearnings that remained unexplored. And herein lies the tragedy: getting sucked into standardized activities is tantamount to the loss of self. According to Kierkegaard, this person has not lived. To shape an authentic life on the other hand is to be fully alive, to make leaps of faith without guarantee of predictable outcome, to make commitments toward creating a desired future without predefined or full awareness of where one’s actions will lead.

The Excitement and Peril of Unlearning Routines

Routines and rules are useful on so many levels. However, as we mentioned, often in organizations we get caught up in routines that have outlived their usefulness and block the flow of good ideas or good performance. And individuals who over rely on routines may be cutting themselves off from an authentic life. We can learn from actors and jazz improvisers who work assiduously to guard against conformity and automatic reliance on routines, strive to get themselves to pay attention to what’s happening in the moment, to respond to what is in front of them. They emphasize the need to master the art of unlearning the habitual enactments and seductive routines that have become automatic. They challenge themselves to explore the very edge of their comfort level, to stretch their learning into new and different areas. They work to become more alive, alert, and open to a horizon of new possibilities, sometimes deliberately disrupting their own comfort so that they can pay attention in the moment.

The saxophonist Sonny Rollins was devoted to unlearning outworn routines. He wanted to break himself of the habit of playing what he had been hearing himself play, so for three years he went to the Williamsburg Bridge near his home in the lower east side of Manhattan, found a place under the surface of the bridge where he could be alone, and played his saxophone. Each time he heard a phrase that sounded like one of his familiar routines, he stopped, waited a moment, then played something he hadn't heard before.

In fact, here's how he talked about his approach:

As soon as I hear myself playing a familiar melody I take the mouthpiece out of my mouth. I let some measures go by. Improvising means coming in with a completely clean slate from the first note. . . the most important thing is to get away from fixed functions." (in Hamilton and Konitz, 2007, p. 103).

Musicians and theater actors monitor the edges of their competence and deliberately explore the limits of their capacity. They throw themselves into actual playing situations 'over their heads', stretching themselves to play in challenging contexts. Musicians must also do other things to 'trick' their automatic responses so that they do not continue to play well-worn phrases that are predictable and comfortable. Saxophonist Ken Peplowski describes how musicians welcome surprise and willingly abdicate control. He says that

we have to risk sounding stupid in order to learn something... We are always deliberately painting ourselves in corners just in order to get out of them. Sometimes you consciously pick a bad note and try to find a way to get out of it. The essence of jazz is to try to put three to eight people together while they're *all* trying to do this at the same time (Peplowski, 1998: 560).

There is a peril in letting go of the certainty of control. When we break open the conventions that we habituate, the known world of certitude is ending. Such disruptions might of course trigger urges that stifle improvisation - the urge to increase control, especially when fear and the voice of shame are prominent. Improvisers report that they often have to battle with the inner anxiety of losing control, worrying about having enough or being enough. But it would be good for us to remember what improvisers in theater and jazz know that there's another peril to guard against: that living in a mode of fear, protection, defensiveness and resistance robs us of vitality and creative possibility.

Considering jazz musicians and theater improvisers, how can we apply these provocations to our own lives? How can we stand in a place of wonder? How can we surrender stock responses to awaken fresh perceptions and novel responses; sensitive to emergence and surprise? How can we welcome the liberation of living with this openness to the unknown future?

Unlearning demands faithfulness to the moment and a continual surrender. As Stephen Nachmonovitch wrote: "Surrender means cultivating a comfortable attitude toward not-knowing, being nurtured by the mystery of moments that are dependably surprising, ever fresh (Nachmonovitch, 1990, p. 21)." When we are open to the possibility of disrupting

habits and entertaining new responses and innovative solutions, we can begin to ask non-standard questions; we are better able to notice disharmony not as something to be eliminated but as a trigger for new discovery, able to look at the anomalous as a possible way forward rather than a variance to be eliminated. We are able to respond generatively to an unfamiliar situation not of our own choosing.

Infinite Games and “Leaping in”

To embrace the unfamiliar and unexpected, we must examine our own assumptions about the purpose the work and organizations we are a part of. These assumptions can be thought of as a kind of “game.” James Carse reminds us that there are two kinds of games – finite games and infinite games. Finite games are played to win. They involve instrumental activities in which players obey rules, recognize boundaries, master the challenge and defeat the opposition. Sports activities such as football, marathons, Olympics are finite games. Business strategies designed to crush the competition are finite games. Political races are finite games. Wars are finite games. Players work within the given, fixed rules and boundaries with the purpose of asserting power and victory, thus bringing the game to an end. The player does not expect to be transformed through the act of playing. Finite games are serious.

Infinite games on the other hand are playful. Playing and living as if in an infinite game is not being constrained by rules and boundaries, it means playing around *with* the given boundaries and constraints themselves for the purpose of continuing the game. While finite players seek to assert power, control outcomes, predict action in advance based on what’s happened in the past, infinite players love surprise, possibility, unpredictability and chances to reframe the meaning of the past as the unexpected future emerges. Infinite players expect to be changed themselves, in unexpected ways, through the act of playing.

Because infinite players prepare themselves to be surprised by the future, they play in complete openness. It is not an openness as in candor, but an openness as in vulnerability. It is not a matter of exposing one's unchanging identity, the true self that has always been, but a way of exposing one's ceaseless growth, the dynamic self that has yet to be. The infinite player does not expect only to be amused by surprise, but to be transformed by it (Carse, 1986, p. 23)

What’s important for our purposes here in relating to improvisation, is to remember that both finite and infinite games are modes of relating to uncertainty. Finite players cope with uncertainty by imposing rules and shortening time horizons. Infinite players imagine distant horizons, welcome surprise and unexpected futures. The infinite player is an improviser. He/she is like a gardener:

A gardener, whose attention is ever on the spontaneities of nature, acquires the gift of seeing differences, looks always for the merest changes in plant growth, or in the composition of the soil, the emerging populations of insects and earthworms. So will gardeners, as parents, see changes of the smallest subtlety in

their children, or as teachers see the signs of an increasing skill, and possible wisdom, in their students. A garden, a family, a classroom – any place of human gathering whatsoever – will offer no end of variations to be observed, each an arrow pointing toward yet more changes. But these observed changes are not theatrically amusing to genuine gardeners; they dramatically open themselves to a renewed future. So, too, with those who look everywhere for difference, who celebrate the genius in others, who are not prepared against but for surprise. (Carse 1986: 154-155).

The infinite player, the gardener, the improviser have a unique approach to what is deemed knowledge. Improvisers and infinite players project forward, attend to alternative paths that open up, catch an intuitive grasp of what's possible. They "know" by acting "as if" a given scenario is likely and stretching into the anticipated "not yet" future. They "know" by seeing and feeling what a future might be like as they leap in.

Striking a Groove: Accessing Flow through Letting Go

Ironically, even though at least initially one would expect that the letting go of ego triggers fear, the suspension of ego and surrender to the moment can trigger experiences of transcendence. It's interesting to listen to the experiences of those who improvise, the hint of transcendence in their experience, as if they are being uplifted, in a state of flow, overcoming previous identity constraints. When they discuss these experiences of surrender, they speak in spiritual terms, as if the ego was not making a measured decision. They speak about being attuned to their surroundings. Some resort to poetic language and metaphorical constructs as they try to capture the embodied feeling of attunement with one's surroundings. Consider the way jazz musicians talk about hitting a groove. The attunement that they achieve pulls them to new heights, they speak of playing beyond their capacity. They speak in metaphors that relay a sense of ecstasy and joy: waves, surges, sailing, gliding.

The first time I got the feeling of what it was to strike a groove, it was very similar to how your body is left after an orgasm; you really lose control. I remember that I was playing and grooving and it felt so good, I just started grinning and giggling. (Jazz drummer in Berliner, 1992: 389).

When you're really listening to each other and you're performing together, it's like everyone is talking to each other through music. When groups like Dave Brubeck's or Miles Davis's or Art Blakey's play, they have good conversations, group conversations. When that's really happening in a band, the cohesiveness is unbelievable. Those are the special, cherished moments. When those special moments occur, to me, it's like ecstasy. It's like a beautiful thing. It's like when things blossom. When it's happening, it really makes it, man. (Curtis Fuller cited in Berliner, 1992: 389).

Relating fully to every sound that everyone is making not only keeps the improvising spirit going, but makes the experience complete. To hear it all simultaneously is one of the most divine experiences that you can have. (Lee Konitz cited in Berliner, 1992: 389).

The lucid apprehension of groove is not the understanding of the cognitive mind; rather the musicians feel and sense this connection in their bodies. Saying “yes” is an openness and readiness to attune, to resonate with whatever is happening. When they strike a groove they are *not* consciously thinking, reflecting or deciding on what notes to play. They seem to aim for a surrender of control, a suspension of rational planning that allows them to open up to a deeper synergistic connection. Further, when this occurs, they seem to be able to play beyond their previously learned capacities.

Players talk about these moments in sacred terms, as if they are experiencing something out of ordinary time.

When the rhythm section is floating, I’ll float too, and I’ll get a wonderful feeling in my stomach. If this rhythm section is really swinging, it’s such a great feeling, you just want to laugh (Emily Remeler in Berliner, 1992: 389).

Not every improvised “yes to the mess” is as pleasurable. Here’s a dramatic example that happened a few years ago, a - response to the demands of the situation prior to the decision processes of a rational ego.

In 2007 on a subway platform in New York, Cameron Hollopeter, a 20 year old student collapsed with a convulsion. A few people tried to help him but he stumbled from the platform onto the subway tracks. A 50 year-old construction worker, Wesley Autrey, waiting on the platform with two young daughters, rushed to help him. Suddenly the headlights of a train appeared. Without hesitation Autrey jumped onto the tracks, pushed his body against Hollopeter so that his body was below the level of the tracks. The train was unable to stop. Several cars ran over the men and missed them only by a few inches. The train finally came to a halt and the two men were lying beneath the train. Undoubtedly assuming the two men were crushed to death, they heard the passengers on the platform screaming. Autrey yelled that they were okay and asked that someone let his daughters know that he was okay. Eventually they were extricated from under the train, covered with grease and soot and bruises, but both were unhurt. Autrey was deemed a hero by the press and other New York City politicians for his unselfish caring act. In interviews later Autrey insisted he was not a hero: “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular. I just saw someone who needed help.” (Buckley, 2007).

Clearly this was an improvised action, a situation that summoned a novel response on the part of Autrey. He had never rehearsed this scenario. How do we make sense of this improvisation? A conventional rational decision making framework would assume that Autrey assessed the situation, considered alternatives, weighed the consequences, then finally made a decision and committed to action. However, this is an unsatisfactory

depiction. Autrey was fully embodied in the situation and responded to the demands of the moment, rather like responding when someone throws a ball at you with no warning.

For some, improvisation is a full-bodied risk, a life of intense practical involvement. Such images fly in the face of image of the individual as “in control” or detached observation or planner. We don’t have a rich vocabulary for talking about life as marked by excitement and peril or describing those who live with passionate affirmation – intensely caring, loving, fearing, living in wonderment or fear. This is partially endemic to language itself. Language is by nature symbolic, a placeholder for more immediate experience, biased toward detached reflection. Our language strains and groans under the weight of capturing the meaningful “now.” The present moment, when lived fully, cannot be captured by words. Our language seeks to grasp at the ephemeral, but since the articulation is retrospective, the rendering will always miss the mark. How does one depict a transcendent moment in which one was lost in activity, attentive to the demands of the situation, responding as the moment requires, unaware of chronological time, not paralyzed by introspection or self critique? We are condemned to telling retrospective narratives and because narratives are sequential we end up reinforcing the fiction that we knew what we were doing all along.

Autrey was not engaging a controlling ego. The arrow went in the other direction -- the situation was such that it drew out a certain kind of action and called for a response on the part of Autrey. The circumstances were a call, a draw, pulled him to respond in an unrehearsed, spontaneous way. To say that the situation calls for a response places the core of activity not inside the head, but rather the embodied presence of one who is attentive to what the situation is eliciting. There’s a way in which during action, Autrey is not a willful agent. Nor can we say that he is operating out of habitual routines. Perhaps we could say that the mind-body of Autrey was attentive to what the situation called for, drawn immediately without deliberation or weighing of risk, to respond to Hollopeter’s distress. He experienced the environment in terms of what demands were being made with an implicit “yes to the mess.”

What Autrey experienced is what jazz improvisers experience, theater improvisers, Xerox repairmen tinkering with a recalcitrant machine, designers running an experiment and tweaking a prototype. They experience a heightened awareness of their surroundings and what the situation is calling for. Their implicit “yes” makes them attentive to opportunities for action, maintaining a sustained responsiveness to the demands of what is occurring. In a sense, it’s not that activity is flowing from the person. Rather, activity flows through him or her. This is Kairos time, not chronological time.

This kind of “yes” that is an erasing of boundaries and an egoless affirmation to the situation is reminiscent of this poem by Reiner Maria Rilke:

*I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for
may for once spring clear*

without my contriving.

*May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.*

*Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.*

REINER MARIA RILKE, *Book of Hours I,12*

Learning to Say Yes to the Mess: Developing Affirmative Competence

Keith Johnstone (1987), a foundational improvisational theater director, teacher and de facto theorist, observes that humans are quite skilled at suppressing action to avoid risk in the moment of spontaneity. The *Yes, And* rule of improvisational theater, or the practice of *accepting all offers* made, helps improvisers overcome this. Anything a player does is an offer. *Accepting* builds on your fellow player's offers by developing the action. *Blocking*, on the other hand – which Johnstone considers an act of aggression – prevents action from developing. Johnstone describes blocking as a well-honed skill people use often in day-to-day life to keep control and stay safe. Accepting offers requires transcending seeming contradictions to find new, generative connections. Accepting others' offers, or practicing *Yes, And*, is what makes good improvisation look telepathic. At the same time, *Yes, And* increases psychological safety. When all players accept each others' offers, each can take risks with confidence. Players know they will be supported; others will *Yes, And* to make them look brilliant and transform what initially look like mistakes into a generative part of the story (Johnstone, 1987).

Human beings are at their creative best when they are open to the world, able to notice what's needed, and equipped with the skills to respond meaningfully in the moment. Improvisation grows out of a receptivity to what the situation offers and thus the first move, this "yes to the mess," is a state of radical receptivity.

This yes can be a passionate engagement. Especially if in the presence of a vital, responsive conversation partner, expansive possibilities could ensue. Improvisers speak and act with the awareness that speech and action are porous, that words are not exhausted at first hearing; that one can leave things open, ambiguous and still to be discerned. They approach activities as an infinite game rather than a finite game in which the goal is to seek closure. Improvisers don't know what the future holds, but act "as if" they are living in a present that is open, contingent, and ambiguous out of which various futures might emerge, "as if" life is an infinite game. For some it is not easy to become comfortable with the notion that they do not need to see all of the implications of their words before speaking. Improvisers cherish this experience; they learn to push and probe

in indirect ways, to impel each other to think further about what's possible. Improvisers learn to trust that others will continue the narrative they started, embellishing another's nascent half-formed thought through the prism of their own, distinct experience. Improvisers strive to overcome the desire to want clear explanations, to have clear words that fit categories that are predetermined and controlled.

Achieving full immersion in the moment may also be accomplished through the discomfort of being in over your head, a deliberate strategy often used by Miles Davis:

See, if you put a musician in a place where he has to do something different from what he does all the time, then he can do that—but he's got to think differently in order to do it...He's got to take more risks. ...Because then anything can happen, and that's where great art and music happens (Davis & Troupe, 1990: 220).

Full immersion in the moment is a full-bodied commitment. Artistic improvisers sometimes speak of these moments as if the controlling ego is suspended, as if they are not weighing options, making choices but simply living into the moment. Pianist Keith Jarrett describes his desire to see everything in the moment as new: "I'd like to be the eternal novice, for then only the surprises would be endless." Pianist Kenny Werner admonished students to avoid being "too dominated by their conscious minds. One must practice surrendering control." (Werner, 1996: 10). The violinist Stephen Nachmanovitch described the experience of improvising as "disappearing", writing "In this state, body and mind are so intensely occupied with activity, the brain waves are so thoroughly entrained by the compelling and powerful rhythms, that ordinary self is left behind and a form of heightened awareness arises" (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 52-53).

What's it like to live like this? What if one met life with an attitude of openness, the capacity to stay in the trouble, welcoming uncertainty, anomaly, failure, change, risk, chance, newness, and the unknown with the tacit hope that the impossible may happen - even at the heart of collapse.

The image of the autonomous, confident strong manager does not completely resonate with this image. Rather this is an image of a vulnerable and inquisitive person, dependent on others, relying on them to retrospectively make sense of what might have seemed incomprehensible or anomalous or even downright foolish.

Getting Past Defenses to Re-Discover and Re-Create Ourselves: Improvisation as the Enactment of Wonder

While expertise and competence might be necessary to respond skillfully, they also can be obstacles when they trigger shame repertoires. Past success triggers an inner judging voice that says "you did it well last time, let's see if you can do it as well this time." This voice paralyzes.

Imagine the first time Martin Luther King experimented with the notion of marching from Selma to Montgomery; the moment an avowed Nazi, Oscar Schindler, mused about protecting a few of his Jewish employees; the instant when Branch Rickey wondered out loud how he might bring Jackie Robinson into an all White baseball league. All of these gestures were improvisations that faced overwhelming odds and defied rational deliberation. Every first attempt was imperfect. Every gesture was fragile and precarious and the risk of failure was lurking on the edge of awareness. And yet to celebrate improvisation is to celebrate the miracle of the human spirit; the moments when the usual impediments of fear and shame are bypassed, at least temporarily, and one can entertain the flicker of possibility that energizes and invites expansion and embellishment.

In these examples (and other less dramatic ones), it's not so much that they were pursuing an idea as the reverse: The idea was pulling them. They were under the grips of an image and able to extend these temporary inclinations, these fleeting glimpses to experiment with unlikely, unpredictable, and unprecedented actions. They could entertain and extend these brief glimpses of what must have seemed just out of reach.

Improvisation need not be so dramatic as Martin Luther King, Oscar Schindler, or Branch Rickey. Imagine a couple locked in seemingly intractable conflict when one partner suddenly, on the spot, speaks in a new, gentler way to his spouse about some thorny problem. This is a small, incremental and novel move that might just open up a new pasture for the course of the conversation, if not the trajectory of the relationship. These are potentially identity shifting, turning- point moments. People are re-discovering or re-creating themselves in these pivotal moments, situational cues that must have been pulling them forward into action, perhaps like the end of the Great Gatsby – “a light so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it.”

At this point, a personal story. It's probably no secret that academic faculties at research universities do not always get along, especially when they have to negotiate and influence one another to arrive at decisions, especially in meetings for tenure and promotion or the hiring of new faculty. Discussions can become fractious and contentious and over time some members begin to anticipate resistance from one another, so come to meetings well armed with rationale to defend their positions and undercut anticipated challenges; over time views become hardened, resentments start to accumulate, and any semblance of friendship decays. With that as background I, the first author (FB), would like to share one experience that illustrates this notion of simultaneously creating and discovering a new identity following a micro improvisation.

Professor Karl Evans (a pseudonym) has been a faculty colleague of mine for 20 plus years. Over the years we have held different views regarding the direction of our faculty. We have had a contentious, embattled relationship. Whenever we have to make decisions for new hires or decide on a tenure case or whenever we meet as a group to discuss school policy, he and I butt heads, sometimes rather strongly. We seem to disagree on everything. And a few years ago it became personal. He and I each began to say unkind things about one another to our other colleagues and the stories spread as rumors are wont to do. At one tenure deliberation we were as usual on opposite sides and

he made very charged comments in response to one of my observations and again our exchange became heated, ending with a personal insult from each to the other. I left the meeting tense and angry and for several days went over his comments in my head, one day even obsessing for several minutes as I was exercising on a stationery bike in the gym.

I distinctly remember one day when I heard about something disparaging he had said about me to another colleague. Oh how my fantasies took over as I considered creative ways to get back at him, what I could say to hurt his pride and lower his status in the eyes of others. Several months passed and we had no other faculty meetings (thankfully). Then one day I noticed at the end of one our long halls what looked like an older, feeble man hunched over. A few moments later I began to walk down the hall and I looked up and saw that the man was walking with a cane and his arm was in a sling. He had a large bruise on his forehead and was hunched over. It took me several minutes to process the image and acknowledge that this was Karl. I even had to ask, "Karl?" After he nodded I asked how he was doing. I learned that he had been diagnosed with a neurological disorder, had trouble with stability and was prone to falls. He has been struggling to stand in the classroom or walk with confidence. Something happened in me at that moment. Without hesitating, I walked up to this hunched over man, hugged him and kissed him on his forehead. I whispered "I'm so sorry." At that moment he began to choke back tears. I walked with him to the elevator with my arm around him for stability. As he got on the elevator I said to him, "I know you and I haven't always gotten along, but I'm very fond of you." Then he fell in my arms and began to sob.

To say that this was an unprecedented exchange between us would be a grand understatement. And it stuns me even now as I recall how some veil just lifted at that moment. When I hugged him and kissed his head I was doing something I had never in my entire life done with any man let alone one with whom I had held such resentment. What was happening here? Some conversation of gestures of central significance began to transpire between us. On the surface it appears that I was seeing firsthand his physical difficulties and simply responded with empathy that one would express toward any one in need. However, more was opening up. I suddenly started to recall positive things other colleagues have said about Karl over the years. I remembered the time that he stepped up as an acting chair at a moment when the school needed new leadership. I remembered the time he helped a junior colleague go through personal difficulties. These past memories all came to me in a flash. In retrospect, I had developed a "trained incapacity" so that I did not notice the nuances and vulnerable side of my colleague. I had been living within the gossip of trivialities, living in the safe predictability of holding a stereotype of Karl, ignoring other parts of him for which I could not imagine any alternative scenario in which I could interact safely and vulnerably with him.

But there was even more to this improvised act because it instantly created a new repertoire of possible futures. Suddenly I "know" that something different is possible between us. There is a silent acknowledgement that we care about one another. I "know" that Karl is more than an enemy hiding in wait. In fact I "know" that he won't attack me at the next faculty meeting. I "know" that I will not take his remarks

personally, he will nod in affirmation at a few of my comments, an unusual gesture for him. I will ask him questions of clarity rather than challenging his assumptions.

This new “knowledge” is a rapid building-up of missing pieces which are beginning to create a future pathway, a new image each of us holds about one another, of a new openness between us. Karl “knows” – without definite prior experience – that I will be more approachable; specifically, he knows that I will not be defensive when he asks questions; he “knows” that I will not challenge his assumptions at the next faculty meeting. And acting with those background assumptions, he and I both actually create the kind of relationship we instantly imagined as possible.

But there is another dynamic unfolding: I was able to experience a tenderness in myself I have never experienced. I now “know” that I do not have to perpetuate hostility, that there is a disarming warmth and vulnerability inside of me that I had never previously experienced in this way. And it all started with one spontaneous gesture, a move that happened so quickly I did not have time to ponder or consider how embarrassing it looks for one male colleague to kiss another on the top of his head. It was a move I made without any conscious deliberation or choice.

This is one way in which improvisation is related to personal transformation. We can discover (and create) new facets in ourselves, reservoirs of untapped potential by leaping in and acting in unexpected ways that upend role constraints. That’s the world of improvisers – living your life as if it is an infinite game; leaping into the unknown without any guarantee of what will happen, discovering the future as you are co creating it, looking back on what has happened and making sense of what was unexpected, creating a new sense of who you are and what you’re capable of next.

Improvisation is a testimony to human freedom. We commonly think of freedom as the right to make choice between alternatives, as if the mind is a container that “has” ideas, contains intentions, possesses capabilities and acts upon the world. This view of freedom emphasizes plans, intentions, control and the ability to shape the world in an intended, desired direction. But the notion of freedom we are suggesting is different. We are proposing that the freedom of improvisation connotes an openness and receptivity, an openness to being captured and taken over rather than seeking to enact control. In this sense, improvisation is a transcendent move, an effort to go beyond the given, to exceed established rules and familiar limitations, to be open to noticing a redefinition of the current order. And there is an additional risk inherent in this - the risk of disclosure. When humans initiate new action they are disclosing themselves to the world, disclosing their uniqueness as persons, risking being seen as different. The disclosing of unique identity as an actor is the opposite of the anonymous role typifications that bureaucracy seeks. Acting on the edge of what is known or acceptable, an improviser risks disapproval, condemnation, rejection, shame. This is courageous in the sense that one may move to the edge of what is acceptable. As Hannah Arendt noted, when one initiates a new action there is no way to predict what the consequences will be, and that is what makes us distinctly human – the capacity to initiate what was previously deemed unimaginable and unprecedented:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man (sic) is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (HC, 177–8).

Humans are capable of a new beginning, can create deeds that might inspire others to move in unanticipated positive directions to create unprecedented futures. Arendt's language is dramatic: "startling unexpectedness," "infinite improbability." These are words often associated with wonder, awe and miracle. To say that we can introduce the totally unexpected is to suggest that improvisation is the enactment of wonder.

In the next section we begin to address how this relates to organizational life, and implications for leaders who seek to deliberately create conditions for creative improvisation. How might we deliberately reject the draw of routines for the excitement and peril of unlearning? What does it look like to reject a finite, zero-sum approach in favor of an infinite game – not only to ensure continued play but to expand what's possible? How might we access flow through letting go of control? What flourishes when a commitment to getting past defenses to rediscover and recreate ourselves is practiced?

Improvisation and Emerging Ideas about Organizational Leadership

While the individual experience of improvisation is compelling and well-worth understanding, it is important to acknowledge that the process of improvisation is inherently social. Improvisation occurs *in response to*. Consultant Henry Larsen, who uses theatrical improvisation with organizations, describes spontaneity as "making sense together, paradoxically by staying with the situation and by acting surprisingly into it, searching for mutual recognition." (Larsen, 2006: 56). It is this openness to act surprisingly into the situation that enabled our first author to rediscover and recreate himself in response to fellow faculty member Karl Evans, to which Karl in turn recreated himself just as spontaneously.

This process of "making sense together" in a situation as people act "surprisingly into it" is transformation in action. One of the reasons improvisation comes with a sense of risk is because it breaks existing social patterns, abandoning the security of being able to predict how others will react. As existing patterns of interaction shift, so do the feelings, perceptions and desires of those involved. These shifts interact to drive new, alternative futures.

As we make our way from the individual experience of improvisation to life in organizations, the inherently relational nature of improvisation becomes particularly

interesting. One of the first things we run up against is the traditional conception of the individual, “heroic” leader.

The first 100 years of leadership science fixated primarily on the individual. Leadership was generally defined as something an individual with formal authority was or did – their characteristics or behaviors. Most leadership models emphasized centralized, top-down command-and-control (Avolio, Walumba & Weber, 2009; Northouse, 2013), the very opposite of what we associate with improvisational dynamics. So what might leadership look like in an organization optimized for improvisation? Scholars have suggested formal position holders might use forms of shared (Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2009) or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). Beyond solely taking the lead, these forms include distributing authority and supporting others’ leads based on what is required in the moment to benefit group and goal (Wageman & Fisher, 2014; Wang et al., 2017).

The leadership dynamic people most often associate with improvisation, however, is the social process of co-creation (Crossan, 1998; et al, 1996; Vera & Crossan, 2004). How could any concept of leadership rooted in the individual hope to capture the actions, feelings and perceptions alive between people creating responsively with each other and the situation? Today, as organizations seek new ways of thriving in a complex, interconnected, and continuously changing world, study of leadership is expanding well beyond the individual, “heroic” approach (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012).

Emerging areas of leadership study suggest that we can think of leadership as more process than person. For example, scholars in the area of relational leadership define leadership as a social process through which new coordination, goals, behavior and change emerge (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Envision a group problem-solving process where diverse perspectives are surfaced and assumptions are deeply explored so that novel solutions emerge (Fisher, Pillmer, & Amabile, 2018). Complexity leadership is a collection of models that address living, dynamic systems and how they change. In this view, leadership is any organizing activity that changes the rules of interaction and propel people to establish new patterns – patterns such as unifying in groups, generating new ideas, and converging diverse perspectives (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Yet another framework proposes defining leadership by the outcomes we have long tasked individual leaders with producing: direction (where we’re going), alignment (how we’ll fit our work together to make progress), and commitment (how we’ll sustain dedication to working for the good of the whole). The Direction, Alignment, Commitment (DAC) framework broadens our understanding of who and what contribute to producing these three outcomes by including all interactions, behaviors, systems and processes that create DAC (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor, & McGuire, 2008).

We can readily see how any of these new approaches to leadership might capture the process of co-creation more holistically than the traditional “hero” model. What are the shared beliefs and practices a group uses to figure out where they’re going, how, and why? Taking direction from a traditional top-down leader is just one way.

In an improvisational system, multiple members together produce direction through the way they develop action. They make spontaneous, original contributions, interpret their own and each other's offers retrospectively, and build on each other's ideas. Members produce alignment by letting themselves be changed, and adhering to flexible structures that ensure a coherent tune or story. Shared purpose and progress around solving a problem or creating something new, combined with seeing one's handprint on group direction and decisions, function as self-perpetuating sources of commitment. Individuals may hold different amounts of authority and spans of responsibility, but leadership clearly is not the function of any single, formally designated member.

Through the DAC lens, for example, creating leadership happens through a number of interaction patterns, behaviors and processes enacted by multiple members. Leadership clearly is not the function of any single, formally designated member, but emerges through a social process among many.

Here's one example from a mid-sized catering company called Tasty Catering outside Chicago. In this story, which unfolded during the recession of 2008-09, leadership emerged as the result of multiple improvisations in response to each other.

After months of belt tightening and budget pruning, the leadership team recognized the time had come. They had to lay off staff in order to further reduce expenses. The kitchen team – the company's biggest labor pool – would absorb the cuts. The CEO called together the kitchen team captains, asked them to identify five people, and said he'd be back in an hour to get the names.

When he walked back in, MariCarmen, a quiet woman who had immigrated from Morelia, Mexico, stood up. She told the CEO she had two questions for him. "Are we family?" she asked. "Will this company survive?"

The CEO was taken aback, but answered honestly. He explained why he believed that if the country survived, the company would, too. He assured MariCarmen they were all one Tasty family – "not Walter, Gutierrez, Velazquez... we are all one family."

MariCarmen took in what he'd said and nodded. "Then," she declared firmly, "we're not going to fire anybody." As the CEO later described, his heart started "beating 100 miles an hour" and his face "turned red." After a long pause, he asked, "Well, MariCarmen, what do *you* think we should do?"

MariCarmen calmly and patiently explained that everyone in the kitchen was valuable. After months of trying, no one could find another job – not at grocery stores, car washes, nowhere. If everyone in the kitchen reduced hours to 25 per week, she reasoned, they could still earn enough to make sure no family would starve. The solution would ensure that Tasty kept its entire crew so a strong team was in place when business improved. The reduction also provided savings equivalent to laying off 7 staff, which should help the company recover even faster.

Recounting the story, the CEO described that in that moment he “wanted to kiss her for caring so much about our company.” On the spot, he decided to take what was left of the company’s emergency reserve and established an Employee Assistance Fund for families of those working 25 hours a week to use if needed. He declared,

... I want every family here, everybody that's working 25 hours a week, I don't want money to be a disruptor in your life. Borrow money... and we'll lend it to you at 4% or 3% or whatever it is. You take as much money as you need, and you can pay it back when you want. If you want to wait till summertime when we're in overtime, pay it back in summertime. Pay it back at \$10 a week, I don't care. But *solo familia... no fiesta, no cerveza. Solo familia. Only family.*

Driving in to work the next morning, the CEO was nervous about what he might walk into. Would staff show up? Would they be resentful of the cut in hours, adding a morale issue to the pile of concerns he had on his plate? But as he walked through the kitchen, the energy was palpable. People were whistling cheerfully, working briskly, and clocking out as quickly as they could. Everyone felt a stake in the company’s success, and everyone was taking initiative to support success. Ultimately, not only did Tasty make it through the recession with all desired staff, but the company acquired several competitors in the process (Huffaker, 2017).

Looking through a traditional lens on leadership, we might point to the CEO as the one providing “leadership” here. Less traditionally, but still placing leadership in the individual, we might identify MariCarmen as the “leader,” because she took matters into her own hands by refusing the status quo and proposing a potent alternative. We suggest either interpretation is inadequate to capture the unfolding process.

When we look at the story with improvisation in mind, we see multiple conditions that led to a series of improvisations through which organization members co-created a new way forward. First, MariCarmen deliberately disrupted her own routine of not challenging authority. She took a risk when she spoke up to the CEO – what she later described as a “moment of bravery:”

I’ve had two jobs before, but they weren't as intimate or as personal. I wasn't as emotionally invested as I am here. It was the first time I had the bravery or the gumption to speak with a supervisor... I didn't know how he'd react. I thought that maybe he would just fire me because I was protesting and questioning him, because I was confronting him.

MariCarmen’s resistance disrupted the CEO’s routine of being obeyed as he executed company plans. His own fears and defenses piled on as he turned red, flush with anger and anxiety. His willingness to say yes to the moment meant that rather than blocking the mess and insisting on having his way he let go and allowed an opening. In his vulnerability, he accessed a flow state from which an option beyond what he could consciously plan emerged. As the CEO described,

And then for some reason, and God only knows what that reason is, I remembered Peter Drucker who said, ‘when in doubt ask your front-line

employees,' his spirit came into me, I says, "MariCarmen, what do you think we should do?" Because she was certainly articulate, that she'd thought it out and she'd communicated with her teams.

When MariCarmen proposed all stay on at 25 hours, the CEO was willing to be changed. He saw the brilliance of her suggestion. Without thinking, he responded with a Yes, And by creating the Employee Assistance Fund on the spot. This innovation not only helped staff weather the recession, but over time was seen as a significant example of how the company cared for all staff, which in turn prompted staff to go above and beyond to give back to the company.

Both MariCarmen and the CEO treated reality as contingent, and shifted their approaches as circumstances unfolded. Although MariCarmen and her coworkers (along with everyone else in the company) had input into the plan that called for laying off five people, she shifted her approach when it became clear no one could find another job. The CEO, too, allowed himself to be changed as new possibilities arose.

The impact of these improvisations extended well beyond the kitchen. Other formal leaders, for example, realized that staff were a source of valuable ideas. As the recession worsened and the company's circumstances changed day-to-day, team leaders established a regular practice of crowdsourcing ideas from staff during the daily company lunch.

If we view "leadership" only as something enacted by an individual "leader," we prevent ourselves from recognizing and creating adaptive systems capable of this type of ongoing transformation. And if we expect people to abandon comfortable routines and say yes to the mess, to be attuned to the pull of the situation with no guarantee of outcomes, then we must consider the kinds of relational-organizational practices that support getting past defenses to recreate ourselves through potentially risky behavior.

Organizational Beliefs and Practices that Support Improvisation

In social organizations, especially bureaucratic ones, too often compliance trumps creativity. Caution is the default orientation, as people learn to avoid incurring wrath of a controlling manager and live within the safe space of standards, guidelines, protocols that insulate one from risk. We propose a few principles and practices that allow improvisation to flourish in organizations. (For a fuller exploration of these principles, see Barrett, 2012)

Errors as a Source of Learning: Performing and Experimenting Simultaneously

Improvisers know that when people are encouraged to try something new, the results will be unexpected, and "unexpected," including errors. They maximize learning by nurturing a mindset of enlightened trial and error that allows them to take advantage of errors to offer new insights. Innovative cultures create a psychological comfort zone, one in which it is safe for people to talk about errors and what can be learned from them.

Failures become occasions for learning. As Miles Davis once said, “If you’re not making a mistake, it’s a mistake.”

Leaders at every level need to do what jazz musicians do – anticipate that when people are encouraged to try something new, the results will be unexpected, and “unexpected,” including errors. Innovative cultures maximize learning by nurturing a mindset of enlightened trial and error that allows managers to take advantage of errors to offer new insights. This involves creating a psychological comfort zone, one in which it is safe for people to talk about errors and what can be learned from them. Researcher Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as group members’ confidence they are respected and accepted. Members believe they can show up fully as themselves, without fearing loss of identity, status or future prospects. Psychological safety leads to greater innovation and development (Edmondson, 1999). This is in part because in workgroups with high psychological safety, failures are occasions for learning.

Cultures that value creativity and improvisation make it safe to try and test, work through ideas, see their consequences of their experiments. They nurture leadership that provides the kind of psychological safety that supports inquiry and experimentation. They nurture leaders who refuse to allow “getting it right” to drive out learning that emerges from experimentation. Leaders realize that they have to lower status so that it becomes safe for people to talk about mistakes.

Minimal Structure and Maximal Autonomy: Balancing Freedom and Constraints

To support improvisation, organizations create flexible structures— an organizational design that has both sufficient constraints and just enough structure and coordination to maximize diversity. Jazz bands and innovative organizations create the conditions for guided autonomy. They create choice points to avoid getting weighted down with fruitless rules, while also maximizing diversity, inviting embellishment, and encouraging exploration and experimentation. To foster innovation, leaders hedge against the trap of “too much consensus,” giving people freedom to experiment and respond to hunches. The underlying assumption is that when people disagree, they’re both right. Thus, such organizations tolerate and encourage dissent and debate.

Jamming and Hanging Out: Learning by Doing and Talking

In jazz, learning and ideas for innovation take place in jam sessions, the creative equivalent of conversations in 19th-century coffeehouses. It is here that musicians get innovative ideas, and learn how and whether their playing is up to par. For rookies and semi-outsiders, these sessions are where they learn what it takes to think and act like a jazz insider. Organizations need to create similar room for jam sessions as Steve Jobs so deeply understood. They need to deliberately design for serendipity, to encourage happy accidents and unexpected discoveries. The key to this in organizations is opportunistic conversations. Great insights occur in the context of relationships and exchanges, as people share each other’s work and ask questions (often naïve questions).

Taking Turns Soloing and Supporting: Followership as a Noble Calling

We put so much emphasis on leadership today that we have forgotten the importance of followership, what jazz musicians call “comping,” or accompanying. In organizations, followership — supporting others to think out loud and be their best — should be an art more fully articulated, acknowledged, and rewarded. Leaders need to model and support the practice of taking turns as leaders and supporters, just as great jazz players do. Followership can be a noble calling, but organizations need to let it flourish. The practice of taking turns soloing and supporting can invite leadership as a process between organization members.

Given the *moment-to-moment contingency* of improvisation settings and the considerable number of possible directions at any given moment, no single player’s actions ever “fixes” what will happen in the future. Remember the theater improviser’s *Yes, And* rule: they must accept as reality everything introduced by a fellow player, and build on it. As each player adds new information, the possible combinations expand exponentially.

Improvisers become adept at creating these supportive partnerships, helping one another develop good ideas without worrying who gets credit. In a safe environment, actors can play with status, support each other to shift status; give up the desire to control the future or win a point. To step outside of a preferred status is a vulnerable move. When status is disrupted, transformational possibilities open up. Letting go of trying to be the smartest or the person who deserves credit for an idea allows one to be changed by what one sees or hears. You do not have to hear or see with the agenda of maintaining your status and are free to respond to accept offers. Maintaining relational connections allows one to overcome the fear of failure that drives us to suppress action. In jazz and theater improvisation it is imperative that players are free to accept rather than block offers.

Provocative Competence

Finally, what is the role of leadership in fostering a climate in which improvisation might lead to organizational transformation? We call this provocative competence. Provocative competence (Barrett, 2012; Bernstein and Barrett, 2011) involves nurturing a double vision, a very special leadership skill that helps people break out of competency traps. Practicing provocative competence requires first, that leaders discipline their imaginations to see a person’s or group’s potential even if it is not being fulfilled in that moment. Leaders also can introduce an incremental disruption that demands that people leave their comfort zones and attempt new and unfamiliar actions. Duke Ellington and Miles Davis were masters of provocative competence; they understood that it was an art form in itself. Leaders in every sector would do well to heed the lesson.

Improvisation as a Process of Transformation

In contrast with change models that emphasize action that is rational and goal-oriented, the study of organizational improvisation explores the ongoing, iterative, and impromptu actions by and between people. Sitting at the center of improvisation, these actions lead

to discovery and innovation. This chapter looked at individual and organizational transformation through the lens of improvisation.

The firsthand experience of improvisers involves deliberate cultivation of the conditions for individual transformation. There is a deliberate breaking of routines, a stepping into the unknown, and valuing of disharmony as a path to discovery. When individuals say “yes to the mess,” they do the opposite of white knuckling their way back to predictability: They embody openness, receptivity, and immersion in the present with ego suspended, opening a channel to intuition. Their experience of this flow, or “groove,” is both full-bodied and transcendent. Whether stretching or being stretched into this space, while there, people recreate themselves through the alchemy of spontaneity and as – more than having ideas – ideas have them.

The organizational conditions for improvisation include beliefs, practices and structures that propel individuals into situations where they are likely to transform, and increase the degrees of freedom people have as they engage in those situations. “Onstage,” performing and experimenting simultaneously turns even well-rehearsed execution into a disequilibrating experience, which cracks open moments of spontaneity and invention. The verve for willingly stepping in and embracing this type of experience is enabled by the cultivation of psychological safety within the group. “Offstage,” people have a less formal container to engage spontaneity through learning by doing and having opportunistic exchanges. In both of these contexts, a balance of freedom and constraints means individuals have room to exercise more imagination and autonomy as they engage in the adventure of the moment.

Looking through the lens of improvisation allows for a shift in the role of positional leaders, and even how we define leadership itself. The improvisational practice of taking turns soloing and supporting dovetails with emerging concepts of plural leadership such as shared and servant leadership – and, even more radically, practicing leadership as an intrinsically social process. These forms of leadership are associated with equipping organizations to thrive and adapt in continuous change. The practice of provocative competence, whether individual or systemic, propels unlearning routines and engaging in spontaneity. Throwing people in over their heads, as the discussion of the individual experience of improvisation shows, creates the conditions for individual transformation.

Improvisation *is* a process of change. By deliberately fostering the mindsets and practices of improvisation in organizations, we just may create the optimal conditions for individual and organizational transformation.

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