

Nourish to Flourish



Nourish to Flourish brings together practitioners' voices and creative practices, and wide-ranging reviews of books that support strengths-based approaches to human interactions.

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

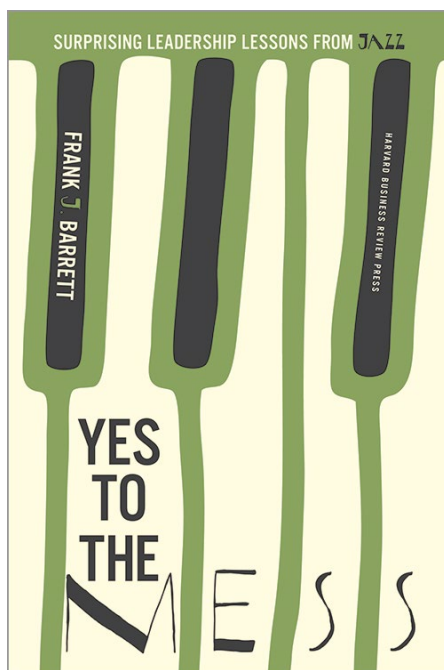
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Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz by Frank J. Barrett

Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2012

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There is a certain quality which can only be obtained by improvisation ... being on the brink of the unknown ... and when you go out there you have all your preparation, sensibilities and prepared means ... but it is a leap into the unknown.



Frank Barrett, in his seminal work, “Yes to the Mess” offers fresh and unique leadership lessons with “jazz” as the evocative metaphor for improvisation. Barrett’s riveting book makes a convincing case for “jazz improvisation” as the transformational way of leadership in dynamic, volatile environments, where chaos, complexity and ambiguity punctuate all contexts of organizational life.

First the title

The title of the book is at once both intriguing and inviting. So what does the author mean by “Mess”, and “Yes”!

Frank Barrett is talking of the subtle, almost invisible, as also the glaring erupting changes in organizational life, as what he calls “mess”: changes for which there are no, or at best hazy cues, meaning that need you to experiment with possible solutions for which there is no clear way to know outcome or guess implications. There is incomplete, even missing information, and yet decisions are to be taken, actions to be initiated.

It is in such conditions and environments that the author proposes that managers invoke and apply “affirmative competence”, an “implicit YES”, that enables them to move forward when faced with “messes not of their making”. This affirmative YES, the author proposes, opens the “state of radical receptivity” – a state where human beings and systems are able to sense and interpret the subtle and strong cues, and “respond meaningfully in the moment” with known and emergent skills. He calls this phenomenon of saying “Yes to the Mess” the improvisation mindset – which equips managers to be mindful, adaptive and creative, and able to “discover the future as it unfolds”, as well as to “discover themselves”.

This book

Through rich and mesmerizing stories of jazz and jazz musicians, business cases, and personal anecdotes, Frank Barrett helps the reader learn, without teaching.

“Yes to the Mess” teaches how to transform complexity into creativity, and do what the best leaders and teams do – improvise. This book is a treasure house of gripping lessons and fascinating insights.

It is difficult to capture in a short review the rich repertoire of compelling vocabulary, and the seven principles that the author offers to understand and practise strategic improvisation. I share below few phrases that have stirred me the most, followed by a brief account of the seven principles.

Collaborative witnesses and catalysts ... those supposedly on opposite/different sides, can together bring “new, unanticipated elements into conversation” and groove towards “mutual experience and knowledge”.

Emergent system ... is smarter than the individual members.

Bricolage ... The art of using whatever is at hand. Organizational life is punctuated with vague happenings, to be dealt with using limited resources. So what works is employees’ emergent ingenuity, resilience and pragmatism.

When people find a groove with one another, they perform beyond their individual capacities.

Groove ... The dynamic interplay, the mutual tuning-in, the empathic competence. When people find a groove with one another, they perform beyond their individual capacities.

Generous listening ... Listening with the selfless suspension of ego. The author talks of Miles Davis's open, appreciative and generous ear that hears strengths even when weaknesses are shining through.

Comping ... Willingness to be a thinking partner, being aware of where the other person is headed.

Seven Principles

Art of unlearning ... The author invokes leaders to challenge themselves beyond the known, to deliberately disrupt routines, explore and stretch learning into new and different areas.

Affirmative competence ... An affirmative belief that a solution exists, this principle is about being open to the unfolding situation, being able to interpret what is still vague and hazy, being able to stay "radically receptive" and respond meaningfully in the moment.

Barrett talks of 'enlightened trial and error' which helps people feel safe to make mistakes.

Performing and experimenting simultaneously ... "If you are not making a mistake, it is a mistake", the author quotes from Miles Davis, the great jazz composer who, it seems, is author's ideal model for the "jazz improvisation" metaphor. Barrett talks of "enlightened trial and error" which helps people feel safe to make mistakes, fail, leverage the unexpected results for iterative improvisation, and take advantage of errors and gain emergent insights.

Minimal structure, maximal autonomy ... This principle invites leaders to design an organization that has both sufficient structure and autonomous "choice-points", so as to foster a culture of innovation.

Jam and hang-out – learn by doing and talking ... The author talks about "opportunistic conversations" that happen when people are offered space and an opportunity to jam.

Followership as a noble calling ... Citing the phenomenon of comping (accompanying), the author argues that organizations should foster the art of followership – supporting others to think and be their best, following and accompanying them in their journey for excellence.

Provocative competence ... is the ultimate extent of appreciation where one is able to "see" others' potential even when there is no obvious glimpse of it.

Barrett's model of 'improvising organizational life' is essentially emergent, like its central metaphor of 'jazz music.'

The author talks of the gift of “learning vulnerability” which empowers one to traverse through the unfamiliar territory.

What resonates with me: 'Take a knee'

There are several phrases and concepts that I would love to talk about if a book review offered space for that. I share instead one story from the book that made deep impact on me. Interestingly this is a non-jazz story in the rich medley of stories about author's central metaphor of jazz.

“Everybody smile ... Don't point your weapons ... Take a knee”, is what Lt Col Chris Hughes ordered his troops when an increasingly hostile crowd surrounded them, influenced by a rumour that Hughes' battalion was charging on the mosque to arrest the high cleric, whereas the battalion's mission was cooperation and protection for the high cleric. Later when he was interviewed to share where did he learn his strategy? “Nowhere, I was making it up on the spot,” Hughes said.

This story for me captures the essence of the “jazz improvisation” metaphor and the “Yes to the Mess” offer by Frank Barrett.

In the long list of concepts and principles, I am particularly keen to learn deeper and practise “generous listening” and “comping”. The introvert, reclusive me is looking forward to jam and hang-out and do-talk-learn-create together.

So is this all jazzing?

Well, broadly, “Yes” – a large part of Barrett's seminal work “jazzes” with me. There are aspects that may come across as not-so-pragmatic. My guess, though, is that such exceptions would be subjective in nature. Most concepts and principles in this book derive their essence from the jazz metaphor. Barrett's model of “improvising organizational life” is essentially emergent, like its central metaphor of “jazz music”. Those who see an invitation in the uncertain, ambiguous and complex may love and benefit immensely from this book. Those who feel safe and comfortable with known and proven methods may find Barrett's propositions impractical, perhaps even daring.

“Yes to the Mess” is at once philosophical as well as pragmatic. The book has an evocative, poetic feel. It was a breezy read for me, an otherwise slow reader. I would encourage students, teachers and all practitioners of organizational change to read, reflect and allow this book to “jazz” their thoughts about leadership and organizational change. On the surface, this book seems to be all about “jazz improvisation”. In effect, it is about leadership insights and practices for improvisation and innovation processes.

I close my review with the quote with which Barrett starts his preface.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke

The book is easily available on all online market places, including Amazon.

<https://www.amazon.com/Yes-Mess-Surprising-Leadership-Lessons/dp/1422161102>

Frank Barrett

It would be tempting to present Frank Barrett in conventional ways, highlighting his professional richness. I would rather quote his self-description ... “I am a jazz pianist. I am also a management professor, and it is safe to say I have learned as much about leadership and organizational behavior from my riffing at the piano as I have from my academic experience”.

Discover more about Professor Frank Barrett at

<http://www.nps.edu/web/gsbpp/faculty>

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