Report

Playful teasing in liminal space

A critical view on organizational improvisation

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HiNT
HØGSKOLEN I NORD-TRØNDELAG

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Abstract

In the beginning of this article I demonstrate how the most frequent rationales for the application of improvisation in professional practice fall into three categories. Next I attempt to show that these categories are valid for work organizations as well. However, I also aim to demonstrate that improvisation can be a threat to safety, quality, and effectiveness. When employees improvise, it may therefore from the perspective of the managers look like unnecessary and irresponsible behavior. I argue that improvisation alternatively can be understood as playful teasing in liminal space; that is, as a strategy to explore borders, thresholds, and situations of in-betweeness where dominant organizational logics do generate rather than solve local problems. That does, however, not imply a celebration of organizational improvisation, but a call for recognition of improvisation as unavoidable but at the same time potentially damaging. In order to shun dysfunctional effects and increase the likelihood that improvisation contributes constructively to problem solving and knowledge creation, I therefore propose that it is important to: (1) distinguish between unique and standardized zones of practice; (2) provide training in the use of improvisation; (3) accept that improvisation is a problem solving, unavoidable, and potentially threatening activity within work organizations.

Introduction: Rationales for professional improvisation

Improvisation is often associated with music and especially with jazz (Berliner 1994). However, improvisation is a part of other music traditions as well. We find improvisation in Arabic and Persian music (Nettl and Foltin 1972), in Italian lyrical songs (Magrini 1998), and in classical music (Gould and Keaton 2000), to mention but a few examples. Improvisation is also a part of other art forms, such as dance (Haselbach and Zemann 1981), drama (Chilver 1978), storytelling (Johnstone 1999), literature (Nachmanovitch 1990) and pictorial art (Gilmour 2000). The significance of

improvisation in art is not a new phenomenon, and improvisation has in other periods of history occasionally had greater significance within different art forms than we observe today (McGee 2003).

Today we see an increased interest in improvisation as an important competence outside the sphere of art. For example, Bruscia (1987) shows how important improvisation is in music therapy, while Bergum (2003), Jordheim (1982) and Yucha (1996) do the same with regard to education. Aring (1973) and Boyd-Mond (1996) point to the significance of improvisation within medicine generally, and Govila (1993) especially within surgery. Skar (2002) lays bare the relationship between improvisation and personal development. Lattimore (1982) shows that skills in improvising are important for the good counselor and Matefy (1972) makes the same point about the good communicator. Donald Schön, in line with Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), concludes pure and simply that a capacity for improvisation is a hallmark of good practice (Schön, 1987; Schön, 1991).

Rationales for organizational improvisation

The rationales for developing improvisation as a professional skill are seen to fall into three main groups: (1) limitation of expert knowledge, (2) lack of resources and (3) problems with prediction. An example of the first (the significance of improvising when expert knowledge reaches its limit) is given by Kaufman et al. when they describe how French soldier Monsieur Alphonse Louis was mortally wounded in a bomb attack during the Battle of Antwerp in 1832. The soldier lost his lower jaw, looked hideous and ended up having problems with eating and speaking. The doctors were perplexed. They had no competence in reconstructing a face which was so disfigured. They sought advice from a silversmith, and by cooperating with him they constructed a mask as a replacement for the jaw which had been blasted away. By means of a cross disciplinary improvisation it was possible to rehabilitate the patient (Kaufman et al. 1997). An example of the second rationale group, the need

to turn to improvisation in situations with limited resources and a lack of materials and tools, is from Robertson (1972) who demonstrates how important the skill of improvising is when one lives in poverty. O'Donohoe shows similarly how decisive improvisation is for the running of a hospital in developing countries where economic limitations made the procurement of basic medical equipment difficult (O'Donohoe et al. 1988b). The third rationale which often crops up in the literature is the significance of improvisation when planning cannot guarantee prediction. On the one hand one needs plans to develop a repertoire for handling incidents which arise such as accidents and crises (Lechat 1993), while on the other hand one needs to complement the planning with improvisation to be able to handle the complexity when the real situation arises, such as Magyar (2000) points out in his analysis of how a hospital in North Carolina in the autumn of 1999 tackled the consequences of Hurricane Floyd. They trusted in their well rehearsed plans, but were not locked into them – improvisation was also necessary to cope with the situations which had not been predicted within the established plans and routines.

All three of these rationales seem to have relevance for organizations: Many businesses today face such complex challenges that new solutions must be found which are contrary to traditional subject boundaries and helped by new forms of cooperation. Heavy competition or reduced budgets create resource shortage and prediction problems which require knowledge creation ahead of routine following, making it clear that goal achievement cannot unilaterally be based on formal planning (see for example Hatch 1999, Mintzberg 1994).

The positive effects of improvisation in organizations have also been referred to in a range of studies. Sharkansky and Zalmanovitch (2000) have for example shown that improvisation is an important element in policy development and public administration. Eisenhardt (1997) points out that improvisation is a condition for good strategy development. O'Sullivan (1999) has demonstrated the same in the area of strategic learning. Handyside and Parkinson (1999) have shown the significance

of improvisation for effective team work. Improvising has been described by Anderson (2002) as a new form of leadership, by van der Bij et al. (2003) as a necessity for product development and by Kamoche and Cunha (2001) as a decisive element in innovation processes.

Working life as jazz or as military tattoo?

In other words, one can find good rationales from the many who promote the application of improvisation within organizations. With this background improvisation should surely have a high status in organizations. But traditional organizational perspectives are on the contrary dominated by presumptions of stability, routines and order, claim Tsoukas and Chia (2002). Right from the start of organization studies at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s, organized activities to a large degree have been about trying to maintain control and create predictability. Classic organization theories were children of their times and promoted a western worldview which was strongly influenced by scientific thinking, claims Margaret Wheatley (1992). Consequently, in our western management tradition, we have a disposition to look at organizations as if they were machines, if we are to believe the Nonaka (1991). From a Japanese perspective he claims that we tend to focus on what can be counted and coded. Formulae and "hard" knowledge which can be described systematically and stored in a computer. Routines and procedures which can be formulated. Linear, sequential plans with measurable goals. Formal organization structures and as much as possible, generalizable principles. It is values like formal control, programming, control, objectivity and measurement which counts once again and which has set standards for how the business will be organized and the work carried out (Orlikowski 1996, Hatch 1999, Tsoukas and Chia 2002). When a standard establishes itself as a taken-for-granted norm, it has become a metastandard. The metastandard in western working life is often referred to as bureaucratic, structural or mechanistic. It is the organization like a well-oiled machine with standardized production which is the underlying ideal picture. If modern organizations are bundles of standardized sets of responses to problems

(March and Simon 1958), improvisations are patently unsuitable. Jazz is the music form which is most often connected with the concept of improvisation. The ideal picture in the bureaucratic metastandard lies much closer to a Souza march and a military tattoo than jazz. In a military tattoo we have an enormous band with brass players and drums which perform military marches strictly coordinated and structured. The intention is to maintain collective control. If any need arises for improvising, this is regarded as a weakness. Everything must be well prepared and carried out with such a strict choreography that the need for improvisation will never arise.

Increased complexity and different practice zones

Improvisation, in other words, contains a challenge for the metastandard which has influenced organizations for a long time. But even though the dream of steering and controlling has been the hallmark of dominant organization thinking, in recent years we have seen that improvisation has steadily become a more popular theme in organization theory (Monturori 2003). This popularity can be understood as a reaction against formal organizations' strong emphasis on rationality, determinism, stability, routine and a view of change as a discontinuity or a temporary exception (Orlikowski 1996, Tsoukas and Chia 2002). As Mary Jo Hatch shows, many organizations have a need to be more flexible and more competent at adapting as a response to changed needs and possibilities in a global market, something which challenges the traditional understanding of what organizations are and how leadership can best be exercised (Hatch 1999). One of the greater challenges is to handle the dilemma between the need for stability and the need for change. Improvisation, and not least improvisation as we know it from the world of jazz, can then appear as a suitable approach. Kamoche and Cunha claim for example that jazz can offer a synthesis of structure and flexibility which is precisely about the contrasting need for control on the one hand and the need for creativity on the other (Kamoche and Cunha 2001).

That organization theory traditionally has emphasized structure and stability may mirror that businesses earlier experienced more stable conditions. Peter Senge claims that the conditions have altered in the direction of uncertainty and more frequent change, and that this must have consequences for our view of organizations (Senge 1990). Senge argues that we live in times characterized by dynamic complexity, while we are trained to relate to static complexity. We do not manage, however, to handle dynamic complexity in the same way that we handle static complexity. Dynamic complexity means that it is much more difficult to predict what is going to happen. Not only are there many elements to relate to, as in static complexity, but the elements also alter and this creates a pattern which is difficult to foresee. The conditions change rapidly and the same actions do not necessarily lead to the same effects if they are repeated. There is less long-sightedness. Hence it becomes more difficult to rely on plans and routines given in advance. The linear form of understanding must be replaced then by a systemic, circular form of understanding, following Senge (1990).

Things were rather more long-sighted than they are today when Henri Fayol (1841-1925) developed his principles for management. He himself spent his whole working life (58 years!) in the same mining company; Commentry-Fourchambault. When he developed his five principles of leadership, he did not mention the need for development, or the need for improvisation. He may well have done so if he had lived today. Flexibility, dynamics, adaptability, innovation, creativity and learning are the honored words in today's business rhetoric, but are seldom seen within classic organization theory. This indicates that the organizations of our time exist under different conditions. Today there is often great uncertainty attached to what may be planned and programmed in advance. Dilemmas occur, but are not necessarily resolved if one relinquishes plans in favor of improvisation. Dynamics and improvisation are important under uncertainty - but so are structure and stability. Standardization and improvisation must live side by side. The one is not more important than the

other, but the one presupposes the other. As bass player, composer and orchestra conductor Charles Mingus would have put it: -You can't improvise on nothin', man. You gotta improvise on somethin'.

Nevertheless, in organizations as well as in jazz may improvisation sometimes be in order, and sometimes not. To some degree we can turn to Donald Schön for help (Schön, 1983, 1987). According to Schön, work life is marked by different "zones of practice". To be able to discriminate between different zones of practice is important for applying improvisation in the right place at the right time. Some organizations are dominated by indeterminate zones of practice, zones that are vague and unique and cannot be managed by applying standardized methods. The work is person-related and dependent on the individual's knowledge and skills, and improvisation is an inevitable and natural part of the work process. Other organizations are permeated with standardization. This leads then to mass production which in our western industrialized world is left to technology if it is economically profitable and technically possible. When improvisation takes place in standardized zones, it is often as a necessity when unforeseen discontinuity occurs, or as a purposeful element in an innovation process.

Organizational improvisation as a necessity

In a working situation which is marked by uncertainty and continual change it is difficult to program in advance or plan what will happen in minute detail. Predicting becomes problematic. The skill of improvisation will be a necessity to resolve tasks and a competence which can and should be developed, purely and simply because all the situations which can arise and the solutions they engender can not be foreseen in the moment of planning. At the same time the use of improvisation raises many challenges for the actors. A formal work organization is not the same as a jazz orchestra. The work organization is characterized by institutional frameworks and expectations which the jazz musicians never experience. The bureaucratic, mechanistic metastandard for how a business should

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be organized and led is marked by hierarchical authoritarian organization, power and responsibility associated with formal functions, positions and tasks, and an emphasis on formal planning and systematic control. The planning should be linear and sequential, the activities should be controlled and legitimized through rational work distribution with the help of goal hierarchies and formal control systems, and the planners must preferably be so skilled in prediction that they manage to formulate a program which can be carried out without surprises or uncertainties. However; this is a prescription for organization which is best suited to stable circumstances (Borum 1999), and which is not well suited to the using of employees' knowledge and innovation skills either. In many of today's organizations discontinuity and flux are the hallmarks. Discontinuity means that changes arise which are difficult to foresee and which cannot be handled by plans and routines on which the business bases its normal operations. Flux means that the changes come so thickly that they are almost like a stream. In both cases solutions must be found that are not necessarily available beforehand. Knowledge must often be created along the way. Improvisation becomes a necessity, and a challenge.

Kamoche and Cunha (2001) claim that improvisation occurs when composition and execution happen simultaneously. This definition can, however, give a false impression that everything is composed in here-and-now situations, as if there were no previous composing or some other form of preparation. Moorman and Miner's clarification is useful here: They see improvisation as music which is created along the way, in the midst of the execution, in the very moment itself, and with a purpose (Moorman and Miner 1998). But they make the point that there will always be degrees of improvisation, which is decided by how short the time is between the planning and the execution. In other words there is not a clear and absolute transition from plan-based execution of work to improvisation. Improvisation happens with a background (the former knowledge you have) and in a confrontation (the situation you are facing). Competence is required for improvisation to be successful, so knowledge, skills and attitudes are significant. A little knowledge about the challenge you are facing can, after all, be better than no knowledge. Skill in handling uncertain situations

presumably makes you a better practitioner. A positive attitude to make use of improvisation when it is necessary causes you not to draw back from situations which make you unsure.

You improvise on the job when you carry out work without being *bound* by prior planning. Improvisation in organizations occurs when plans, routines and other forms of premeditated programs cannot - or should not – supply the answer about how one should proceed. That is, organizational improvisation can be a virtue of necessity, an answer to our lack of prior knowledge which is necessary for us to solve challenges we face. But organizational improvisation can also be a conscious choice we make to arrive at new knowledge, as when we might develop new products or services, or when we need to resolve complex problems.

Organizational improvisation as a conscious choice

The depth of human experience depends on the fact that we can alternate our views of reality, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer claimed. However, a habitual blindness may gradually develop and conceal layers of reality, he warned (Cassirer 1944, 170). Habitual blindness develops easily also in organizations. One follows old thought and behavior patterns even in situations where there is a need to create something new. Improvisation involves breaking patterns, challenging taken-for-granted presumptions, playing with established rules and expectations and avoiding conformity. Improvisation is purely and simply necessary when the intention is to develop new knowledge, as in connection with leadership development, team development, strategy work or other decision-making and creative processes. The significance of improvisation in developing new products is one example. Brown and Eisenhardt show that profitably successful product innovations arise when one combines minimal structures around responsibilities and priorities with a high degree of communication and the freedom to create improvisation in the projects (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997). Correspondingly, Lester, Piore and Malek studied product development in businesses exposed to

competition and found that the innovation processes which were most structured were those which resulted in the least innovative products (Lester et al. 1998). These processes as a rule were led by what Lester and his collaborators called analytic managers; managers who placed emphasis on clear and measurable goals, and who controlled through clear plans, frameworks and rules. How one should work, who should be involved, when one should work, the goals for the project, and so on were so predetermined that it left a structural framework around the work which ensured that creativity was hindered. Such an analytical process gives the feeling of control of progress and results, but creates little innovation. The solutions one arrives at are confined to an area which is already well restricted through the structural frameworks.

Lester, Piore and Malek concluded that a balance between what they called analytic and interpretive management was best. Instead of structuring the process through analysis and rational problem solving, they recommended understanding product innovation as an open process where customers and expertise through dialogue interpret the new situation. Then, they claim, the uncertainty and ambiguity are important and should not be eliminated through analysis and structuring. This does not mean that one should completely avoid structure, but the structure should under gird the creative work and not limit it. The concept "minimal structures" then becomes important. Improvisation succeeds best when optimal flexibility is permitted within minimal structures (Barrett and Peplowski 1998). The structures should not lock up the inquiry process, but only be enough to be a starting point and a reference base. Even jazz is built on structure (Alterhaug 2004). Therefore Kamoche and Cunha (1991) suggest benefiting from knowledge of jazz when developing a cross-disciplinary self motivated team. Jazz can teach us to find a synthesis between the need for control and the need for flexibility. As with jazz improvisation, development of knowledge in a team has as its goal the uniting of planning and execution so that they occur in one and the same process. Variation, surprises and flexibility within minimal structures become central for innovation and knowledge development.

Improvised organizations

Occasionally informal organizations arise when the official organizations become cumbersome and too bound to bureaucratic traditions. Finding local solutions to problems which cannot be handled by standard methods is a form of local improvisation which occurs when the formal organization ceases to be of practical use. We see this sometimes during catastrophes and other unexpected events. During the tsunami catastrophe in Asia between Christmas and New Year 2004 the local Norwegian authorities and Foreign Affairs Department were considered too slow and bureaucratic to be of any help to those who were injured and otherwise affected. Thus there sprang up informal organizations of people who took responsibility and acted as and when necessary, but which simply dissolved again by themselves when the task was fulfilled. Similar things happen also within organizations, claims Karl Weick (1993), building on Lanzara's study of the 1980 earthquake in Southern Italy (Lanzara 1983). "Ephemeral organizations" spring up, 24-hour flu organizations of people who together attempt to accomplish the work without waiting for official approval. It can be misleading to call the 24-hour flu organization an organization; it rather represents waves of activities with actors who come and go; it is organization as a verb more than organization as a noun. It springs up in spite of, and because of, the "imperfect grand designs" which the official organization represents. It is a plastic, amoeba-like underground organization with informal networks and non-formalized routines where the actors break with official decisions in order to find solutions for problems they can not get to grips with by the official standards. The problem is that it is a myopic organization, declare Levinthal and March (1993), with a "local intelligence that is short sighted", according to Karl Weick (Weick 1993 p.373). It is "street smart", based on an action-oriented sensitivity for local conditions, but not necessarily for the needs of the organization as a whole. The solutions which are used locally can appear to create problems in other parts of the organization, like when the home nurse's car which should be used to reach a patient has been commandeered by the home help who had forgotten to deliver food to one of the pensioners. Let us, then, look at some challenges which arise when improvisation is applied in organizations.

Improvisation as a non-canonized practice

In the first place, it is important to be aware that improvisation in organizations can be a threat to productivity, quality and a range of other factors which one must have control over and which the organization's management is accountable for. On the other hand is it hard to imagine an organization without improvisation if it is not a thoroughly automated machine. What happens if managers strongly insist that employees work according to predetermined standards? We have an example from Brown and Duguids analysis of how repairers of copy machines at Rank Xerox really worked (Brown and Duguid 1991). When they had to repair copiers which had a typical breakdown, the official procedures and standard methods to be followed were good enough. But when they encountered breakdowns in the machines for which they found no solution in the procedures, situations corresponding to those Donald Schön called indeterminate, they then proceeded in ways which were neither known to nor accepted by the executives.

Brown and Duguid called the official standard methods of working "canonized" practice. It is not good protocol to oppose something which has been canonized. If top management canonizes certain procedures, they risk pushing underground the work methods and solutions which in reality will be used. Employees will not disclose how they really work to resolve the problems which the official procedures have no answer for, because they fear that it will not be approved by the leaders. A loyalty conflict arises between working according to the official methods (the canonized procedures which do not solve the problems) and the working methods which in real situations help customers and users out of difficult situations. If management becomes too little attentive to and pressurizes employees to follow the standard methods of working, they risk never having valuable knowledge coming to light.

Loose-coupling, hypocrisy and mentally-sick organizations

Meyer and Rowan (1977) maintain that work organizations exist in institutionalized contexts with a great pressure to organize itself and work in ways that are perceived as legitimate in that part of the society that they are most closely linked to. This causes the organization to be driven to introduce new practices, procedures and organizational elements which are dominant in the sector they are a part of. We see for example that organizational recipes and management ideas move like epidemics or pandemics, just to be repressed by others. "Balanced Score Card" swept over work life a few years ago, before which there were variations of Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Total Quality Management (TQM) and other TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations) which had their heyday. Many organizations introduce new ideas more or less ceremonially, not because there is really a need for the new ideas in the business. The problem is then that conformity towards institutional rules and forms of working may come in sharp contrast to criteria of effectiveness in the organization, according to Meyer and Rowan (1977). The new ideas set standards for the organization and execution of work, and naturally enough will be most suited for standard situations. When they are applied in unique situations they create more problems than they solve, and not least, this is experienced by those who have to carry out the work. But what can one do here? An organization which prioritizes internal efficiency before change in line with external expectations will have problems with legitimacy and support when they do not act according to the dominant rules and live up to the expectations in the institutional field which they are a part of.

To maintain a "ceremonial conformity" the solutions will often be a loose coupling between the official and the unofficial. Outwardly it looks as though the business is following all others, but the formal elements of the organization deceive us. Seemingly organizations become isomorphs (look like each other), but the isomorphism hides the realities. A loose coupling has arisen between the

official and the real execution of work (Weick 2001). There is a difference in what we give

expression to and what we actually do. Hypocrisy is the method of organizations to survive when

conflicting demands arise, Nils Brunsson concluded after studying public sector in Sweden

(Brunsson 1995). It becomes a normal reaction to play the hypocrite. The organization says one

thing, but does another. The leaders play the hypocrite, along with the politicians and employees,

just to get peace in the situation so you get to do that which must be done for users and customers.

We give the impression that we are working according to the formal decisions but in reality we

improvise indiscriminately. In the worst scenarios we have organizations which deserve psychiatric

diagnosis. Neurotic businesses where employees dare not take responsibility from fear of being

penalized for mistakes, schizophrenic businesses which have multiple identities and paranoid

businesses where one feels persecuted by all and sundry (Kets de Vries and Miller 1984).

Organizational improvisation: Unavoidable but challenging

Is there then any alternative to Brunsson's cynicism (Brunsson 1995)? Do we have to live with

hypocrisy? Instead of driving non-canonized working methods "underground" with new policies and

decisions, Brown and Duguid (1991) recommend that organizations try to reduce the gap between

canonized and non-canonized practices. Then one can prevent valuable local knowledge from being

hidden from the rest of the organization, and one can develop improvisation as a necessary and

desirable organizational competence, through for example training programs. Good improvisation

requires practice, and paradoxically requires successful improvisation preparation (Barrett 1998;

Alterhaug 2004). However, before an organization can inaugurate training programs in

improvisation, there is the prerequisite of the raising of the status of improvisation. Top

management, by virtue of their position, is central in making improvisation a legitimate and desirable

competence and practice. Top management according to Brown and Duguid needs to acknowledge

that the organization consists of a multiplicity of different practices, and that canonized standard procedures and decisions have their limits.

At the same time it is important to acknowledge that local improvisation also creates unfortunate and unintended effects, partly because it has a here-and-now focus which causes dysfunctional consequences for other departments or causes later links in the work process to fall from notice -- local improvisation is myopic. By acknowledging that improvisation both is a necessity and that it creates problems, however, organizations improve the possibilities for important local innovations and methods of problem solving to become a part of the knowledge of the organization, and not only of individuals or work groups. Then there will also be fewer loyalty conflicts among employees who have to choose between following standardized procedures or applying local knowledge. By acknowledging improvisation along with the possibilities and dilemmas it creates, the unwanted consequences of local improvisation are reduced since there is no longer a need to hide it. If improvisation is seen as a non-legitimate form of practice, adequate light will not be shed on the possibilities and dilemmas of improvisation.

In this piece of writing I have tried to show with the help of cross-curricular research as well as practical examples how improvisation as timely action and under the right conditions is a hallmark of good professional practice. More than that: It's simply impossible to carry out any form of work without a certain degree of improvisation, as long as the tasks are requiring more than merely mechanical repetition. In that case, knowledge development will not take place, and unforeseen challenges will not be properly mastered, unless it happens more or less by chance. However, I have also attempted to demonstrate that professional improvisation may be myopic and create second order problems, that is; problems that surface at later stages in a work process. Accordingly; improvisation becomes particularly challenging as the consequences become organizational. In order to shun dysfunctional effects and increase the likelihood that improvisation contributes constructively

to problem solving and knowledge creation, I have argued that it is important to: (1) distinguish between unique and standardized zones of practice; (2) provide training in the use of improvisation; (3) accept that improvisation is a problem solving, unavoidable, and potentially threatening activity within work organizations.

Conclusion: Improvisation as playful teasing?

The latter; to accept improvisation, is first and foremost a challenge for the organization's managers. Since a formal work organization may be seen as an attempt to institutionalize standardized sets of responses to problems where rule following is imperative (March and Simon 1958, Orlikowski 1996, Hatch 1999, Tsoukas and Chia 2002), efforts to apply improvisation will challenge these institualization processes and the status quo. This will particularly be the case if top management is celebrating a strong bureaucratic ideology and practice. When actors challenge the celebrating ideology through improvisation, it may then, seen from the perspective of the managers, easily be regarded as annoyance and as some kind of unnecessary and provoking teasing. Teasing may in deed be irritating, annoying, distracting, exasperating, and infuriating. Yet, it is also possible to conceive it as appealing, creative, lighthearted, artistic, inviting, and engaging. Hence, teasing has two sides: Just as improvisation teasing may be playful and it may be harmful. The challenge is to allow playful and avoid harmful teasing. Playful teasing is a way of exploring liminal space, that is, borders and thresholds and situations of in-betweeness (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Cunha and Cabral-Cardoso, 2006). In these spaces transgression of the reigning order is possible, and as such, it has a potential provocative element that calls for communicative competence (Lugones, 2006). As a communication strategy playful teasing offers openings and helps us cope with the provocative and potential dangerous elements in an uncertain situation. I will maintain that improvisation in an organization, if accepted as an unavoidable activity that may or may not be harmful, can have the same effect, especially under uncertainty: In indeterminate zones (Schön, 1983, 1987) we are faced

with liminality where organizational logics and procedures do generate rather than solve local problems (Dressman, 1997), and have to find ways to learn playfully and creatively in lack of prescriptions that work (Clegg, McManus, Smith, and Todd, 2006). Jazz musicians, for example, deliberately create and explore liminal space where improvisation may take place. They invite each other through playful and creative "teasing". The musicians are expected to listen and to respond. If they choose to reject or ignore the teasing, exciting jazz will not develop (Hatch, 1999). In a similar way, playfulness in organizations allows us, as March argues, to transcend rationality and purpose. It may be perceived as unintelligent and irresponsible behavior, but such "foolish" behavior opens for experimentation and knowledge creation (March, 1976).

At the same time; the jazz metaphor has its limitations. I have in this article attempted to show that improvisation in organizations is a paradoxical phenomenon which creates dilemmas for which there are no standard solutions. While improvisation is expected at a jazz concert, rational operation and predictability is expected in most work organizations. In many cases it is Souza marches and military tattoo which are the dominant *official* music. But hidden in the trenches – on the night shift with the welders, with the home help on a home visit, in the classroom and in the operating room, there is jamming and improvisation. Local solutions are applied in unique situations which do not let them be handled by predetermined programs. These solutions in unique situations are a necessity in order to get the job done; but the same solutions next time round can pose a threat to the quality and effectiveness of the business, and can endanger people's lives because safety routines are ignored without being reported. For a work organization is not the same as a jazz orchestra, regardless of how exciting the jazz metaphor might be.

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