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Face The Music and Go Beyond the Business Blues

By Paul Kwiecinski

Do you want to know what’s really going on with your employees, clients or co-workers? Get ’em to write and sing the blues!

It’s 7:38 on a hot Miami evening. The room is slowly filling with people from all over the world — jet lagged, disheveled and a bit dazed from the conference’s endless meetings. The house lights dim, and one-by-one the musicians take the stage. The guitar player strikes his first long drawing chord and music rises from the glowing amps. The crowd — surprised at first — settles in, and a low buzz sweeps through the room. By the end of the first song the mood has changed as the sound of the blues starts to work its magic. . .

This article is about using music as both a force and springboard to move an organization forward while accessing reserves of energy and productivity heretofore untapped. The music is the blues, the father of almost all popular music. It’s simple, yet profound, and based on speaking the truth in good times and in bad. It’s understood at a gut level by everyone. As South Bend Slim said: “If the blues teaches us anything, it’s that there is an alternative to despair in the face of adversity.”

A little background: *Face The Music* is a company founded by OD consultants and musicians that delivers blues (and other musical genres) based programs as part of organizational interventions, offsites, and meetings. We realized that all of our clients have the blues, but they didn’t necessarily

have a way to express them or go beyond them.

Using our clients as guinea pigs, we developed programs and found that participants joined in enthusiastically. After delivering the first few interactive programs—participants writing and performing blues songs about their work issues—our consulting group developed *Beyond The Blues* organizational processes that address the issues expressed in the lyrics set in the context of systemic behaviors and revealed in *Face The Music* sessions.

The methodology for organizational change is a two-step process: 1) Diagnosis and kickoff with blues writing and performance, and 2) *Beyond The Blues*, a process for addressing issues raised in the blues writing. This latter takes many forms, from a 2-hour debrief, processing, and action planning process, to a several month change initiative, that can also include music as a way to look at progress, address emerging issues, and celebrate milestones and completion.

During a *Face The Music* interactive event, participants enter into an altered state, the “Blue Zone”, in which normal culturally accepted limitations are suspended, and participants are more receptive and responsive to new ideas and perspectives. They are encouraged to take that cubic centimeter of chance and turn it into a new way of operating on the job, of approaching issues; one that looks for innovative results, and continually looks toward creating an even better future. This

CONFERENCE CONNECTION

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**Face The Music:
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is the essence of the organizational work called *Beyond The Blues*.

Innovative practitioners have been using music as a way to shift organizational thinking for years—Max Depree’s Leadership Jazz, Roger Neirenborg’s Music Paradigm using a symphony orchestra, drumming circles, and Benjamin Zander’s Art of Possibilities sessions using small classical string groups, to name a few. All invoke the compelling power and magic of music. The blues songwriting, where participants create and perform their own work-specific tunes, ups the ante a bit with the truth-telling, real world lyrics and the risk of performing them in front of peers and leaders.

It is the goal of every organization to get beyond their blues and achieve the success they’re looking for. To do this they have to listen to what the blues have to say. What’s really going on? Where are people at with that, assessed emotionally as well as with the conventional metrics?

This perspective and attitude is especially important in today’s business climate. After mistakenly convincing ourselves that the wild ride of the 90’s would last forever, in today’s challenging environment we need to develop business in a way that taps the resources and resonance deep within people. That is, where the power, the motivation and the “no problem” attitude in the face of adversity lies. The downsizing, —do more with less—drink a little more coffee and do a couple more hours— mine for profitability is sledding fast down the icy back slope of the law of diminishing returns curve.

There’s something coming, finding a way for people to bring more of themselves to their work. Their passion, values, and spirit; their seemingly unrelated talents. A way to engage the wisdom they gain in dealing with life. People bring all of this already, but all too often it isn’t acknowledged or considered when roles are defined, initiatives designed, or plans refined. It’s time to redefine the boundaries that once served well, but are based on old understandings that beg to be updated, that need to reflect the evolution in awareness in human systems, consciousness, and

the nature of reality. Physicists have been talking more like Zen masters for decades, but we have yet to incorporate their discoveries into our organizational systems. Their world is holographic, but ours is still largely perceived mechanistically.

The phenomenon of “silos” within organizations is a symptom of mechanistic understanding—that one’s team, department or division has interests that are separate from the whole, and that its actions can be determined without considering its interdependence with the

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larger system. At a large bank, we designed sessions based on interdepartmental communication and cooperation, as they realized that after multiple mergers and tremendous growth, there were many opportunities with existing clients of the bank that were not being explored because other divisions didn’t know of their existence.

Music, and the blues, is a door that can open into that next level. The sound of it describes a deep multi-dimensional actuality, that is at the same time simple and true, local and global.

Chorus—A *Face The Music* Interactive Event

Picture this: Sixty-five directors and middle managers from a division of a global electronics firm are meeting for three days at a conference center to plan initiatives to achieve their goals for the coming year. Upper management has defined a new direction; and many roles and personnel have changed. On the evening of the first

day they arrive in the ballroom, which is set up to look like a blues club. Some Muddy Waters is playing in the background, and on the stage is a band setup.

Participants haven’t been told what’s going to transpire, but they will soon find out. The house lights dim...

After the first song, the MC sets the context for the evening: “We know from experience that everyone here has some business blues; what you may not have, is a good way to express those blues constructively, and a process to look into

how you can, individually and as a group, go beyond those blues. Tonight you’ll have that chance. You’ll have the opportunity to write a business blues song about your work, and sing that song with the *Face The Music* band.” A few groans, some laughs, a little buzz goes through the room. The MC talks about the tradition of working blues, how it applies today, and how the innovation, teamwork, collaboration, time management, risk taking, etc. that it will take to accomplish this in only two hours, are the same sort of competencies that they are going to need to accomplish the business goals that were presented this afternoon.

Impossible—seemingly. Perfect—yes. Before the songwriting and performances begin, the group has a chance to discuss what the pressing issues are, which ones carry the most juice, and what impact they are having on their results—all this is raw material for the songs to come. They also get a chance to pick their own blues name, e.g. High-Voltage Tammy Watkins, or Fearless Freddie Bluestein, which, aside

from being fun, gives the participants a chance to step outside of their day-to-day personas and approach the task at hand from a different perspective. Sprinkled throughout these processes, the band plays some of their own business blues songs, like “The Overcommitted Blues,” or “24/7”:

*I'm a 24/7 from the heart of Indiana.
I never take any time for myself,
It's not that I don't wanna,
It just seems that my business
Is cranking both day and night,
And I ain't got time for sleeping,
Gotta catch an early flight.*

Just before songwriting begins, the band plays a song they've written just for this client, developed from interviews. In a half an hour they've gone from a general discussion about blues and business, to a song specifically about what's going on in their company. They're ready! The band presents a few templates—songs that can be imitated in form—and they're off. The people seated at each table become a “band,” and coached by *Face The Music* band members, they write and rehearse their song.

The energy builds in the room as the bands name themselves, write the lyrics and start singing to each other. Hoots of laughter and exclamations of “you can't say that” ensue. The energy buzz builds as they work in a flurry to complete the seemingly impossible assignment.

Then comes performance time and the excitement climaxes as the audience watches their co-workers, some in hats and sunglasses, sing, dance, and get out their blues.

They've sung, they've laughed, many said it's the most fun they've ever had at work. How does this translate into organizational change and productivity?

Verse 1—What we do is our song

What we do it is our song – our actions, emotions, the way we create our desired results – or not, how we speak, move, breathe, solve problems, celebrate success, deal with disappointment – you get it. We're all playing our songs: alone; in duets,

trios, quartets; and sometimes in choirs & choruses. Let's look at our work through the metaphor of music.

In one sense, there are two types of music we play: 1) The music the players wish to play, dream of playing, maybe intend to play—the vision, and 2) Their default music—the stuff that can be generated without thought or intention—the themes and modes that have been programmed into our very selves since we were born, and that we call up with one click of our remote control. The music

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The vision music is the creative, cutting edge, fun, productive work. The default setting is that old madness of trying to get a different result by doing more and more of the same thing. The theme could be: “It's like trying to climb a muddy hill to get everyone to cooperate and to get anything done around here.” It's been played over and over, and when the next project is approached from the same place, the song will be played again.

The best work, that produces innovation, breakthroughs, and extraordinary results, comes from players that are composing and performing their dream music; going for their vision. And though the song doesn't always sound like the dream they had in their head, its music resonates with originality and insight.

Mediocre results come from players imitating and regurgitating the same-old, same-old, like the over-worn jingle put out under pressure when they feel there's no

time to produce something interesting and innovative, or a re-run of the dissonant team theme, sung for years which no one has stopped to rewrite the harmonies.

The *Beyond The Blues* work identifies the music you want to make, personally, as a team, and as an organization, and helps you develop the tools and systems to create and produce that music.

Lets look at some business terms and transpose them into the music metaphor:

» Vision—The music, songs, and themes you wish to create and live

- » Mission—The impact you would like your songs to have
- » Teamwork—Playing as a tight band
- » Culture—The genre of your music, it's history, values, norms, traditions; are you hip or classic, innovative or derivative, risk taking or conservative?
- » Strategies—Responding from within an innovative structure to the music of the culture and your band mates to manifest the vision and goals
- » Innovation—Not playing the same old tune
- » Leadership—Conveying a compelling vision to the band and responding appropriately to the needs of the band members and the listeners to make the vision happen
- » Time management—Keeping time and playing together in complimentary rhythms
- » Clients—The listeners and consumers of the music you're playing for them

This metaphor is brought to the employees of an organization, and applied in a down-

home, let's-get-real way that opens the door to change.

Business Blues

Face The Music assesses an organization through blues. What's going on right now? The blues is a good medium. It is a deeply ingrained musical paradigm in our culture. Almost all popular music can be traced back to the blues: jazz, rock & roll, country, folk, and now rap and hip-hop, have their roots in the blues. The blues are about speaking the truth about what's going on and how you *feel* about it. It engages the emotional intelligence of the participants.

The songs people write are about what engages them emotionally, what their work extracts from them, and gives back to them in the process of doing the job and creating the results. They express the issues, problems, and absurdities—and also the victories, areas of pride and accomplishment, and the stories of adversity overcome to achieve realization of a goal.

There is an intense burst of energy and enthusiasm when these groups write and sing their blues, after which they find themselves in a new space. It's been fun, electrifying, and even perhaps a bit of a riot; and now there's a new perspective, the process has brought them to a new space where insight and a detached re-evaluation of situations can take place.

Verse 2—*Beyond The Blues*: Leveraging to Real Change

After a *Face The Music* interactive event where people have written and performed these songs, there is a window of opportunity; they're in that space that they have created themselves through music. They composed and performed their own music—they spoke the truth, and had a blast doing it.

The opportunity is to utilize the “blue zone” to approach the issues and processes of their work from a new perspective. Now that we have it, what should we do with it? There is a half-life of a couple of days to take some action to make change, after which the emotional state will run its

Case Study: Make It Up and Make It Happen

Here is what happened with a group of drafted-rather-than-enlisted blues musicians from Panasonic.

Their *Face The Music* event was a smashing success; great songs—funny, truthful, and they took interesting, creative turns in lyrics and song forms. Their performances were strong, perhaps aided by the fact that Panasonic has a deeply entrenched karaoke culture, so they had experience singing in front of each other. There were even some verses in Japanese, complete with translation.

The next morning they returned to the same room greeted by the band playing some easy “morning” blues. The program opened with a highlights video of the performances that helped to remind the group of the state they reached the night before.

They were then introduced to *Beyond The Blues* process. The purpose: to address the issues they identified with specific actions, and to implement those actions in new ways, so next year they won't be singing those same blues.

The *Beyond The Blues* consultants led a debrief of the processes used in creating, rehearsing and performing the songs. They posted the insights, the patterns that were revealed, and the systemic conclusions of everyone present. These spoke directly to how they wanted to operate differently in order to get the kind of results they were going for in their business. In small groups they drafted proposed standards, operating principles and agreements that would support improvements in their system going forward. These were presented to, reviewed and adopted by the whole group, with musical support from the band.

Because one of the main themes was long, inefficient meetings, the group was taught the MetaMeeting Process™. This is a simple (but not necessarily easy) format for running effective, results-based meetings using objective setting and meeting management roles to keep meetings on track and on purpose. This was a concrete tool that was taken back and implemented division-wide.

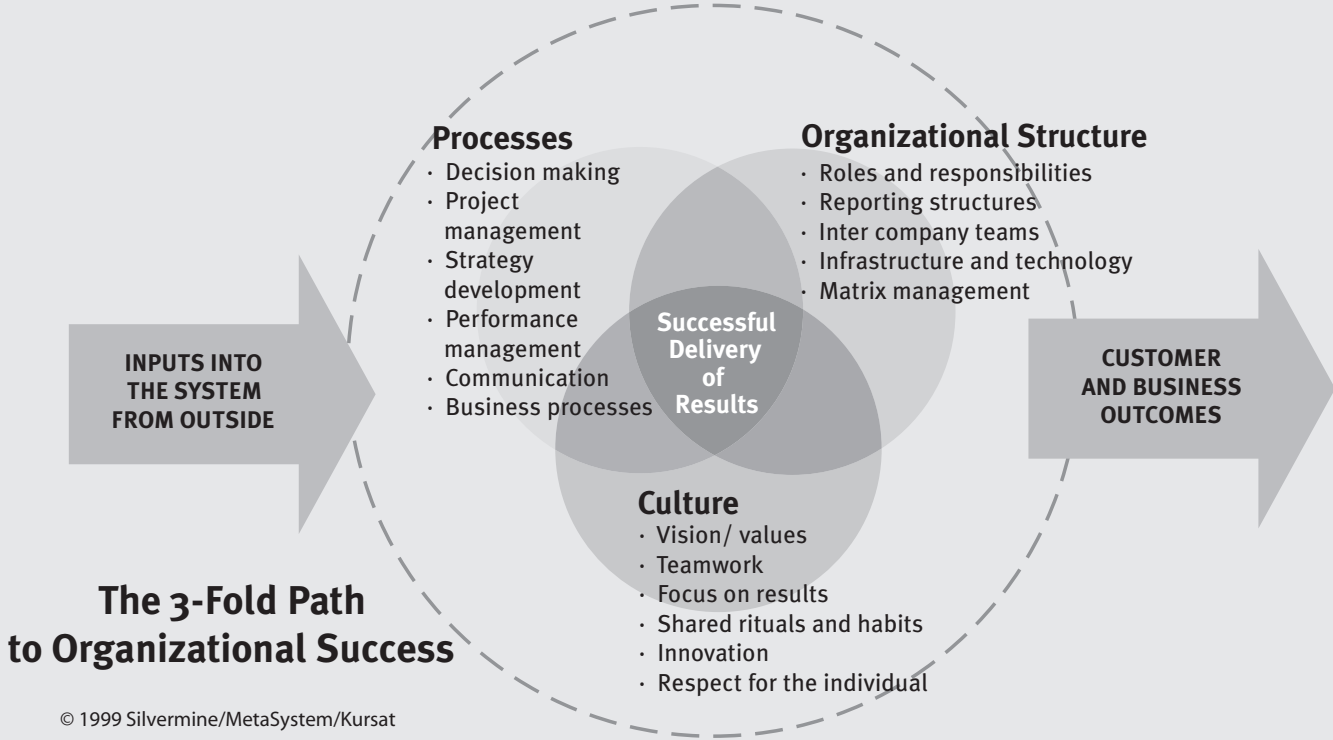
The group then generated a list of themes and subject matter of the songs they had composed, and prioritized them by identifying which issues will have the most effect on making the new year's business goals. After a short brainstorming training, done as a talking blues, they broke out into brainstorming teams and generated ideas and potential actions to address the high-priority issues. The energy was high, and the VP was smiling. The criteria for ideas were that they be actions within their circle of influence; something that they could develop and implement with the empowerment and resources that were available in the room.

A lot of ideas came back. Each priority area had plenty to choose from—definitely not the same ol' blues.

On the break the VP decided to go with one idea that had been presented: to form cross-functional project teams around the high-priority areas. When they came back, this was done, and the teams generated their first draft project plans. They were empowered to make their own decisions on the ideas presented, and plan out the implementation. They were on the blues' case and chasin' 'em out the door.

The teams went back to work and implemented their plans; the VP shared that through the *Beyond The Blues* process his group came to a place of enthusiasm and concrete action that otherwise would not have happened.

Figure 1



course, and the event will become more of “a fun thing we once did.” The key is to engage in some meaningful change work that leverages the new awareness, to stay in touch and to build on it.

The raw material of this work is: 1) The themes expressed in the songs, and 2) The process used to create them. This is the jumping off point for *Beyond The Blues*. Themes are business issues, areas of focus, and problems to be solved. These issues have just been presented in a way that they have never been expressed before. It’s a great opportunity to engage dis-continuous improvement, a quantum jump in the way problems are approached, how potential solutions are generated, and what we decide to act on and implement.

The themes and process changes are tackled at the same time, as teams are given new approaches to change their bottlenecks and non-productive patterns while taking on the issues they identified. Although our method uses the music and the blues, the basic principles of this methodology can be utilized using almost any experiential exercise—each

have their own flavor. Our consulting group has also used outdoor ropes course activities, golf, horses, building activities, and made up exercises on the spot using available resources and landscapes. The common element is to provide an activity that requires creativity, collaboration, communication, and is complex enough to reveal rich information about the client system.

The process of writing and performing songs reveals the operational systems this group of people employs in order to create their results at work. The way this 6-person band approaches writing their song shows a wealth of information about how the larger organizational systems operate—their strategies around time and resources, how ideas are captured and processed, what sort of leadership is shown, who is heard and who is not, what definitions of quality are adopted...it’s all contained in that 45 minutes of intense songwriting and rehearsal.

In his article *The Holographic Organization*, (“The Holographic Organization.” *Consulting Today*. March

1997) Alain Cardon of Metasysteme France states: “The concept of holographics is as simple as it is universal; like the saying, ‘Observe a grain of sand and you will perceive the universe. A group’s processes and strategies observed over a few minutes can illustrate and reflect strategies over months, years, or tens of years.” Organizational holographics can be used to diagnose organizational problems by giving clear global structure and process definitions of their systems. This diagnosis facilitates process and structure-oriented interventions that modify the system, thus improving results.

The process is focused on making near term changes in the participants’ local environment—their circle of influence—changes that are the first steps toward larger system transformations that support the evolution of many teams, the organization, and the individuals involved. Like a positive virus, the new way of acting and being infects the organizational DNA to change the overall direction.

The insights gained by looking at how a song was created can be used to

consciously modify business processes within an organization. A group can work on what they are doing, and *how* they go about doing it. The *how* learning can be utilized in everything that they do, improving performance across the board.

Bridge—Themes, systems analysis; leverage; mechanistic vs. holistic system behaviors or characteristics

The *Beyond The Blues* sessions work on at least three levels at one time. On the

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one hand they focus on clearly identifying issues and taking concrete, innovative, accountable actions to affect those issues.

On another level, they work on moving the context of the groups' work from its current reality toward "Let's make some cool music! As a team, and as an organization." It works the sorts of questions mentioned above: What music do we want to make if we choose it consciously? What would it look like to groove and jam every time I came to work, and have my co-workers jamming with me?

The third involves being able to critically assess one's organization in a systemic and holographic way, and, in real time, modify that system to operate more smoothly and get better results. It is important also to develop the lenses to look at your own role, your team's functioning, or the whole division, and see the patterns that need tweaking, and take action.

Beyond The Blues uses the model in *Figure 1* as a tool to cluster themes and issues and to look at leverage areas and potential impact. The circle in the middle represents the client organization; it could be a work team, division, or the whole organization.

The participants look at where their blues tend to cluster, and how they can design initiatives that are coordinated and synergistic.

Learning to play these new scales, rhythms, and harmonies needs practice and commitment. It needs a conductor with vision and direction also. The songs get updated and tweaked along the way. The facility to adapt on the fly is enhanced, and once the basics are in place...sweet improvisation—just in time responses at the speed of change.

Verse 3—Action, not desire, is what the future needs to find you

The heart of these interventions is to find a new source of action for the teams and organization involved. How can they take a profound experience and apply it to inform their decisions on how they want to move forward? What can they do to remember the breakthrough experience and establish themselves in the new way of doing things? Without the commitment to action from insight, the event becomes another interesting thing we once did.

The key is to create the opportunity and get moving. "Wow, that sounds great," without inspired, focused activity is opportunity lost. Start small, start big, but get going.

The fundamental role for the consultants is to convey the potential, and to understand where the leaders want to take their teams. What is this company really going for? Let's get clear on that. Is there a way for us to create the organization we always wanted to be a part of right here? Let's go there.

Outro—Jamming in the 21st Century

Have you ever seen a team that's doing well, having fun, and constantly building on each other's ideas as a part of their

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work? They're jamming. They've aligned on the fundamentals, and they make new, innovative work music every day. They each bring energy to the team, and are energized by it. Jamming is the elevated state of performance where people respond in real time to what's going on around them and add their own music to the mix adding further value. It's that place where you understand what Miles Davis meant when he said, "There are no wrong notes."

Jamming in the workplace is where the energy is freed up from the old polarizations, and is circulating and building. When jamming, listening is as important as playing—understanding what is happening, when to use a soft touch, when to step forward, crescendo-ing together as a group, playing between the notes, leading and supporting as needed. In this environment, everyone is invited to bring as much of themselves to the table as they want. The music and creativity is richer, and the body of work larger, the harmonies deeper and more satisfying.