

What Thomas Edison's Relationship With Jazz Teaches Us About Innovation

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While Thomas Edison was a prolific inventor, he was passionate and vocal in his dislike for jazz. He was famously quoted for saying the music sounded better when it was played backward. Ironically, it was his most-prized invention, the phonograph, that enabled the newly-created musical art form to reach a wide audience quickly. The anomaly of contradiction continues to grow as there is now a coveted Dutch music award known as the 'Edison Award' that acknowledges personal contribution and advances in music. Many of the recipients have been significant contributors to Jazz.

Edison *ignored* the musical art form by not considering that Jazz might have any beneficial contribution at all. A very powerful and well-known man at the time, Edison used his power to *shame* anyone who might consider Jazz music by mocking the music and saying it sounded better by being played backward. As with most disruptive innovations, even the force of disapproval from someone influential like Thomas Edison could not squash the momentum that was being built as musicians filled with hope and possibility began to explore and experiment.

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While not directly regulated, Jazz was subject to the regulation of prohibition. Jazz flourished in Speakeasies where people congregated in the underground to drink alcohol,

profess their anger against the establishment and dance. In this free and alcohol-influenced environment, Jazz musicians were not constrained by “official” culture from exploring and experimenting. The guitarist could lead, a flute could be played and themes were toyed with as what would become a renowned American art form evolved.

Edison’s refusal to entertain or even spend a moment considering that Jazz might be a viable musical art form is a clear example of two of the three of the worst responses to change: ignoring, shaming and regulating. The same process occurs when a new or innovative idea is introduced in the workplace. The best of us will fall into the dangerous ignoring, shaming and in the most extreme cases, wonder where the regulation is to contain the emerging chaos.

I am reluctant to admit that sometimes I am not a fan of the new music I am hearing, but I’m sure that I’m not the only one who is somewhat bothered by it. The same goes for the workplace. There is often an extreme resistance to new ideas that don’t come from the senior leadership team, and of course, there is equal resistance to ideas that do come from them. When all employees – without reference to title or power – can’t explore new ideas, the business always suffers. After all, the organization is leaving the untapped potential of the people closest to the work stagnant.

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The danger of ignoring, shaming and over-regulating

Unfortunately, when ideas become mainstream and mature, they can suffer the same barriers they initially overcame. Ignoring, shaming and over-regulating is dangerous to the future of any organization because they distract employees,

leaders and investors from understanding and embracing innovation.

To stay relevant, we must meet challenges, trends and new realities head-on, no matter how uncomfortable they might make us or how skeptical we are. If you find yourself embracing any of the debilitating three qualities that squelch innovation, challenge yourself to embrace a new idea or concept. Evaluate the idea through a balanced lens considering what could happen, versus creating barriers to protect the current system. There is no risk in exploring ideas.

The world is small and accessible, and available knowledge is limitless. Our business ecosystems —which include our suppliers, partners, employees, customers and surrounding community — contain unlimited resources that are available if we are willing to look beyond false barriers and become open to using what is readily available. Title and hierarchy are not important when creating and innovating. Ideas can come from the top, the bottom and the middle.

We all have to be ready when the spotlight shines on us. The guitarist or the drummer may lead in a jazz ensemble, and when the light shines on them they know it's their turn to shine and show what they have. The music they create at that moment will be unique to them and never repeated in quite the same way.

Miles Davis said, "Time isn't the main thing, it's the only thing." Time is our only resource. We have more freedom and flexibility in the workplace than ever. We cannot even imagine what is possible with individual contribution and boundless collaboration. Alternatively, we will never know what we could have contributed individually if we don't fully show up and use the time and resources we have to the fullest extent.

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