



### Learning Leadership in Jazz

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Performing music through my youth was a formative endeavor. It required learning an entirely new language (music), the value of practice, and coordinating with others. My young band days were filled with many traditional band favorites and challenging classical pieces. The director, tall on the podium, would lead us through various tempos or dynamics of how loud and soft we played. With the music memorized more than not as the year progressed, the director was a focus of attention that provided confidence and a rallying cry to perform well.

One summer at a music camp, I impulsively signed up for a jazz class. I never had taken jazz, and figured there was nothing to lose by trying an art form that I had never played before. If I was going to look like a dork, well, a 2-week camp is the best place to do it as the friends formed during that time likely would dissipate quickly. The director was a quiet man, his name being Mr. Zalinski or something like that. He spoke quietly, moved with ease, and led us through all sorts of rhythmic interplay that was it was all new and foreign. His body was jazz, and I learned a new way to follow. Between being a stranger to the form of music, the director's ease, and the willingness to take risks playing with other people that I was not self-conscious with, I found myself enjoying it.

To my surprise, I was selected to have a solo, ad-lib part, for the performance at the last day of camp. The ante was upped for me in my learning. A remarkable thing happened a few days before our performance. The director started us playing the music and then, just a few bars into the song, drifted to the side. I was lost! I had relied on seeing him there, to direct us, as he snapped his fingers and gave us subtle direction. He stopped us before long, asking why we fell apart. "Well, you walked away from your place in front of us!" we exclaimed. "You don't need me anymore, other than to get you started. *I've been following all of you* for the past couple of days with my directing. Jazz is about listening to each other, and performing the music the way it feels right in the moment."

I was dumbfounded. Had he really been letting *us* lead? When the performance came, he did the same thing, standing off to the corner of the stage while a group of high school kids set their own rhythms and variations on the music. As for my solo, I felt confident in the band behind me, even more than in myself, lost in my adolescent fears. But they were there behind me, supporting me for that minute of solo improvisation. I don't remember at all what I played. But I still recall the sense of a group leading themselves. Thanks, Mr. Zalinski, for teaching a different manner of *leading*, and a different manner of *following* in an ensemble of specialists.