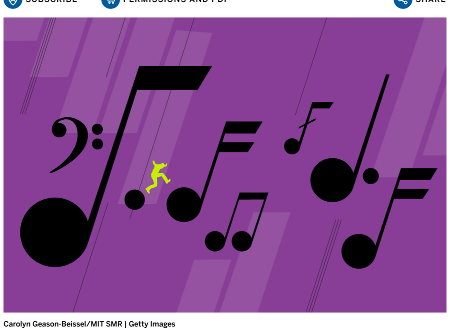
RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

To Adapt During Crisis, Take a Lesson From Jazz

How can leaders inspire agility during a crisis? Learn three critical leadership strategies that helped two prominent symphonies transform during the pandemic.

Scott Sonenshein • January 15, 2024

Reading Time: 14 min



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Crises, whether supply chain disruptions, natural disasters, or the arrival of an upstart rival, are a revealing moment for leaders. Such scenarios can push companies to the brink of meltdown or usher in dramatic organizational transformation. Whether an organization withers or thrives during a crisis is shaped by its resourcefulness — how it uses its existing resources.

The pandemic decimated many industries, but the performing arts industry faced especially grave challenges: rampant unemployment, limited prospects for revenue, and an existential crisis over the relevance of the arts in dire times. Initially, musicians could not congregate to practice, performance halls were shuttered, and classical music was the last thing on the public's mind.

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As tough as these circumstances appeared to be, what collaborator Kristen Nault and I learned during a multiyear study of two prominent orchestras surprised us: Not only was it possible to survive trying times, but it was also possible to emerge better because of them. The leadership key? Becoming nimbler by thinking more like jazz ensembles and less like classical orchestras.

Business leaders often call this agility, but for a musician, this is the realm of jazz improvisation. Our research found three critical changes in leadership practices that helped leaders facing disruptions act like talented jazz musicians. Leaders in any industry can apply these practices during their organization's next crisis.

The Resource Paradox During a Crisis

An organization's most significant challenge during a crisis is that it typically needs resources — including time, money, expertise, equipment, and connections — at a time when activating resources has become more difficult. When faced with high levels of uncertainty, a leader's first instinct might be to pare down investments to lower the risk of worst-case outcomes. Ironically, such defensive behaviors can contribute to the organization's demise. Threat rigidity sets in, with the leader doubling down on old habits and control mechanisms that make it difficult to harness the full potential of resources.

Instead of fearing crises, leaders can learn to embrace their hidden benefits. And by following the adage "Necessity is the mother of invention," organizations can unlock the full power of their existing resources to respond to a challenge. Research on resourcefulness finds that when leaders take this approach, they can foster collective creativity to help groups solve problems in adverse times.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses discovered ways to access more knowledge (to understand how to repurpose products and services), capital (to invest in IT infrastructure), and connections (to identify new markets for revised products and services). Resourcefulness helped businesses pivot: Bakeries pivoted to selling raw ingredients for home chefs, clothing companies to producing face masks, vacuum manufacturer Dyson to designing a ventilator in 10 days, and distilleries to manufacturing hand sanitizer.

A Tale of Two Symphonies — and Leadership Approaches

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we engaged in a multiyear research study with two of the world's premier symphony organizations, the Houston Symphony and the Revenite Symphony (a pseudonym because the organization requested confidentiality).

When we began our research, it was an open question as to whether Revenite and the Houston Symphony would survive. Both organizations had struggled financially before the pandemic, with millions of dollars in losses and even more significant budget deficits. Both organizations were also steeped in customs and traditions, which, as any business leader knows, makes change difficult. Yet, crises often produce one valuable resource needed to instigate considerable change: urgency. Urgency makes it possible to rapidly implement changes that might otherwise have taken years (or not happened at all). A lack of urgency dooms many change management initiatives, making its abundance during a crisis an opportunity not to be overlooked. As we interviewed and observed symphony executives, staff members, and musicians, we discovered that the leaders of each organization took very different approaches to addressing the crisis and mobilizing their resources to respond.

Revenite announced a suspension of operations near the start of the pandemic. Its leadership could not envision how to pivot its labor and fixed assets, such as its performance hall, to capture new sources of revenue. As one Revenite executive told me, "I don't think we had a sense of what the pathway toward restarting the business was going to be. … There were too many unknowns."

After furloughing all of the musicians and most of its staff, Revenite focused on surviving. The organization radically slashed costs to 25% of the pre-pandemic budget and tried to get the remaining skeleton workforce to increase productivity to keep the symphony chugging along. Leaders sought to wait things out until the pandemic subsided. This defensive strategy led Revenite to constrict resources when the organization needed them most.

Afraid to go broke, the organization retreated — at a significant cost. Revenite lost any relevance to its community at this time of great need. Several difficult-to-replace musicians quit the industry. Trust between leadership and all employees, already strained from the furloughs, further deteriorated as Revenite's leaders centralized control of the organization and focused on squeezing the remaining labor force to do more. Many employees felt burned out from working long hours with little purpose. No one, including executives, understood the "why" behind the work. As one executive said to me, "I'm working to sustain a thing that has no inherent meaning other than its survival. That's a really weird place to be. … Our mission is to perform orchestral music."

In contrast, the Houston Symphony made an early commitment during the pandemic to remain open. It abandoned the long-term planning that symphonies typically engage in (measured in years) and shifted to figuring out the next few weeks — for its concert program, staffing, safety practices, and marketing efforts.

At first, congregating in the performance hall was not allowed due to regulations and safety concerns. So instead, the Houston Symphony turned its musicians' homes into performance venues. The musicians teamed up with musically talented (but not professional) family members, including partners and children. Instead of relying on a huge production team, the makeshift videos in its Living Room Series of performances were created by a minimal number of staff members. Other orchestras that livestreamed performances tried to re-create the symphony experience on Zoom, with 70-plus musicians appearing in tiny square boxes. The Houston Symphony realized that it would inevitably disappoint its customers by trying to transform a rich in-person experience into a mediocre online one. Instead, it reimagined the delivery of its content by inviting customers to learn about musicians and their families in an intimate setting while listening to enjoyable music.

When the Houston Symphony moved to livestreaming full concerts without an in-person audience, it could reach new geographic markets not possible with in-person-only events. It charged an admission fee for the virtual concerts (which was uncommon) and attracted donations from a wider variety of patrons. This brought in additional resources, such as revenue, new supporters, and media attention, as well as an enhanced reputation among industry peers.

Importantly, these decisions also created extra time for the organization to figure out how to safely and effectively return its patrons to the performance hall, which Houston did long before most other symphonies. However, the organization went further, using the pandemic to usher in a more profound transformation.

Instead of making deep cost cuts and unsustainable workforce reductions like Revenite did in the name of resourcefulness, the Houston Symphony took a strategic approach to resourcefulness. Leaders focused not on simply surviving but on strengthening the organization's long-term outlook — financially, operationally, and in terms of its mission:

- The need to be more mindful of costs during severe financial distress helped leaders balance the budget, a goal that had proved elusive in years past. The entire organization made a newfound commitment to follow a pathway of greater fiscal responsibility into the future.
- The organization expanded its donor base beyond Houston and reached customers worldwide with the paid livestreaming product. Although at face value a livestreaming ticket yielded fewer proceeds than an in-person concert, many attendees were first-time patrons. Additionally, a large portion of these people donated money in addition to buying the livestream tickets.
- The symphony maintained livestreaming performances after returning to a full, in-person concert schedule — earning incremental revenue with little added effort.
- In a striking change, the organization introduced its patrons, who traditionally heard Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, to a more diverse set of composers. Pre-pandemic, the pressure to fill 3,000 seats deterred the Houston Symphony from experimenting with new composers: When programs featured unfamiliar works, filling the theater with ticket buyers was a challenge. But that pressure disappeared when the performance hall was restricted to less than 50% capacity. The organization brought in much-needed new voices, and its audiences responded positively — so much so that the symphony upped its efforts. In the year before the pandemic, fewer than 1% of the symphony's classical concerts featured musical pieces composed by members of underrepresented populations or women. In the 2023 fiscal year, and with Houston's hall at full capacity, that number expanded to 72%.

Learning to Get Jazzy: Three Strategies for Leaders

Many organizations, whether a symphony, manufacturing company, or professional services firm, are metaphorically structured like an orchestra. They have conductors (leaders) and rely on sheet music (routines and practices) to coordinate different parts (teams, divisions, or functional areas) of the enterprise. Organizational leaders aim for reliable and standardized performances, much like conductors aim to make the matinee performance of a symphony the same high quality as the evening one. Through many rehearsals (that is, the repetition of behaviors), it is possible to make incremental improvements, but leaders seek output that, by design, is predictable and relatively static. Operating like a symphony orchestra allows organizations to thrive in environments of stability and low uncertainty. But during a crisis, this type of model can be disastrous.

Our research found that the Houston Symphony significantly changed its operating model. It pulled ahead of peers in the industry when leaders changed the operating metaphor to that of a jazz ensemble. As one executive told me, the collective team saw the power of flexibility: "Leadership has come from the admin and staff side and the musician side. … We've combined different kinds of music and programs that [we] would never do before. I would say that as a large organization, we're operating more like a small organization."

That is the kind of result that many business leaders navigating disruptive crises only hope to nurture within their teams.

How did the Houston Symphony's leaders inspire the organization to become so nimble? Our research found three critical changes in leadership practices that enabled them to adapt.

1. Keep the music playing.

Like a jazz ensemble, the Houston Symphony tried to keep the music playing, literally and figuratively. While Revenite stopped playing music and functioning as an organization, the Houston Symphony kept playing … anything. For example, the livestreamed Living Room Series was a far different product than a fully staffed professional production with 70 musicians in a 3,000-seat venue. However, those performances brought in new patrons and donors, and nurtured the symphony's relevance in the community. This experiment also helped build the organization's experience with livestreaming, which proved to be an important launching point for a more comprehensive virtual offering. Leaders, staff members, and musicians discovered their hidden capabilities around playing different types of music, utilizing novel technologies, and coordinating in new ways.

Without clarity on how the pandemic would unfold, the Houston Symphony focused on short-term decisions, asking "What can we play this week?" instead of trying to have an answer for the rest of the year. This allowed the symphony to have the most relevant information to inform its operations — real-time information that could be used to make decisions today, instead of relying on shaky assumptions about an unknown future. Leaders of any type of organization can understand a crisis by experimenting and then taking stock of lessons learned instead of remaining frozen by fear and uncertainty.

2. Don't wait to practice transparency.

Houston's leaders fostered strong trust between management and all employees. As resources become scarce during a crisis, it's easy for trust to erode if decisions lack transparency. Instead of shrouding decision-making in secrecy, the Houston Symphony invited representatives from the front-line staff to weigh in on critical decisions. Relationships with the musicians' union strengthened. By revealing sensitive information and disclosing the dire predicament the organization faced early on, leaders built trust and sparked a sense of urgency. Both were required in order for the team to quickly make significant changes.

Trust also came from empowering employees to experiment and not punishing them for making mistakes. For example, the marketing team had to try different campaign messages until they found one that resonated with patrons. The development team turned the mere fact that the symphony was playing into a comeback story — one that donors eagerly supported. The operations team discovered ways to socially distance musicians and audiences and continually modified its plans as the pandemic evolved.

3. Collaborate on a postcrisis identity.

Finally, the Houston Symphony constructed a new postcrisis identity that reflected its leadership role in the community. Instead of trying to return to pre-pandemic norms, leaders expanded the organization's mission to cater to a wider, more diverse set of community members. The organization committed to experimenting with new types of music and continued with livestreaming to introduce audiences worldwide to a larger repertoire of selections. Expanded educational programs helped it reach underserved communities, providing a stronger foundation to diversify the artistic talent base.

Having helped shape the Houston Symphony's comeback during the pandemic, employees embraced this community-centered vision and rallied to keep the transformation momentum going. Additionally, they all came to see their own skill sets differently. After effectively coping with major adversity and helping to build a stronger organization, employees came to see themselves as capable crisis navigators — which will help everyone during future crises.

A Second Act

As our research progressed into its second year, we grew increasingly certain that Revenite would fold. We turned out to be wrong. As the organization neared the brink of death, Revenite's leaders stopped waiting for the crisis to abate and ushered in a dramatic turnaround. It began when leaders engaged in *updating*. Updating is a leadership competency in which prior beliefs are revised to better address problems. It's often a struggle for leaders to change direction after committing to a course of action, but Revenite's leaders managed to dislodge their previous views of the crisis as the organization withered. They managed to adapt, as any jazz musician must.

Although the relationship with Revenite's musicians had been deeply tarnished, leaders restarted a dialogue. The full impact of the furlough and Revenite's decision to suspend operations became clear. Leaders updated their assessments of employees' emotional states, gaining a more vivid understanding of how they had suffered economically and emotionally. Musicians explained that they had felt disconnected from their love of performance and struggled to stay sharp without practicing as an entire orchestra. After learning about employees' hardships, leaders finally felt an urgent need to course-correct.

Revenite's leaders next updated their assumptions about financial resources. They finally acknowledged that cost-cutting was not a viable business strategy or a pathway to transformation. Instead of viewing employees as cost centers, leaders shifted to seeing them as revenue generators. By becoming more strategic with their resourcefulness, Revenite's leaders could mobilize their existing resources to respond to the crisis more effectively. Musicians returned from furlough and started helping to increase revenues through donor outreach and, eventually, concerts.

Leaders also started noticing more about how other entities were adjusting to the crisis. They found inspiration in the Houston Symphony's ability to operate during the pandemic — and also learned from Revenite's musicians' efforts to create COVID-safe concerts to raise money for themselves during the furlough. These examples showed Revenite's leaders that operating during a pandemic was possible — something they had thought was insurmountable earlier in the year. By the end of year two of the pandemic, Revenite was well on its way to returning to its precrisis strength.

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When a crisis hits, getting jazzy will help leaders in any industry adapt and positively transform their organizations. Instead of fearfully retreating at the onset of a crisis, using resourcefulness as a set of strategic tools can help leaders turn a threat into an opportunity. By unlocking the hidden potential of existing resources, organizations can emerge from a crisis with better financials, stronger operations, higher team morale, and a reinvigorated sense of purpose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Scott Sonenshein is the Henry Gardiner Symonds Professor of Management at Rice University, author of *Stretch: Unlock the Power of Less — and Achieve More Than You Ever Imagined* (HarperCollins, 2017), and coauthor (with Marie Kondo) of *Joy at Work: Organizing Your Professional Life* (Little, Brown Spark, 2020).

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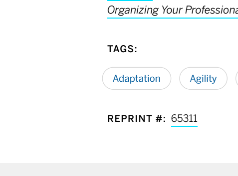

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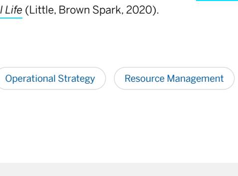

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