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Perspective Transformation and the Jazz Mindset

A Model for Post-Crisis Organizations

By Steve Cole and
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A Note from the Authors:

This conceptual paper is based upon a 2016 doctoral student project on dynamic capabilities. In the earlier work we concluded dynamic capabilities are difficult to develop without a significant and sustained intervening transformation, which at the time, were a rare occurrence in organizations. We decided to revisit this work and release it in this early conceptual form in light of the momentous events that occurred in early 2020; the Covid-19 pandemic, and the nationwide protest and social unrest that placed the continuum of structural racism in America into high relief. These events have presented the kind of perspective transformation for individuals and organizations that we had previously concluded was a rare occurrence. We asked the question: what if we were all collectively experiencing a sudden and rapid perspective transformation? What should individuals and organizations do? The lens through which we are viewing perspective transformation comes from Jazz, an artform that originated with, and has been carried forward by generations of African Americans. We find it fitting to apply this mindset to the necessary and ongoing perceptible shift required of all individuals and organizations as we work to acknowledge and address the ongoing effects of systemic racism.

There can be little dispute that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the political and social unrest that has activated a heightened need to acknowledge and address the ongoing effects of systemic racism, will test the dynamic capabilities of both individuals and organizations. Dynamic capabilities are described as the capacity to adapt and change established patterns of behavior in the face of dramatic environmental shifts (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011). Teece (2007) wrote that dynamic capabilities can be disaggregated into the capacity (1) to sense and shape opportunities and threats, (2) to seize opportunities, and (3) to maintain competitiveness through enhancing, combining, protecting, and when necessary, reconfiguring the business enterprise’s intangible and tangible assets (Teece, 2007, p. 1319).

The highly dynamic aftermath of any crisis requires greater dynamic capabilities from organizations and the people in them; however, most individuals and groups lack a strong foundation for developing them and most organizations are not well-designed to support and promote the development of dynamic capabilities. Furthermore, the bureaucratic features of traditional hierarchical organizations, while useful for many purposes, may nevertheless constrain innovation, adaptability, and change.

Despite the many rich descriptions of dynamic capabilities in the literature (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007; Winter, 2003), Bernstein and Barrett (2011) found in a review of the management literature on dynamic capabilities that “while

much has been written on the what of dynamic capabilities, frighteningly little is known about the how” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 66). Even when individuals and organizations have a desire to develop their own dynamic capabilities, there are few resources available for how to do this.

In this article, we attempt to create insights into ways to develop dynamic capabilities in individuals and organizations. We synthesize a number of differ-

dilemma that exposes a discrepancy between what had been assumed to be true and right and what is being experienced. A disorienting dilemma can produce changes in an individual’s understanding of themselves, revisions in their belief systems, and potentially changes in how they live their lives. Mezirow called this a perspective transformation, which is part of a larger transformative learning process that includes examining, questioning, and

of reference. Alternatively, transformative learning focuses on developing a kind of autonomous thinking that fosters critically reflective thought; where people become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions. To facilitate this, they need to practice recognizing different frames of reference and use their imaginations to examine problems from different perspectives.

Perspective Transformation

Adaptation and change in a post-crisis environment will require shifts in established routines and employing a different kind of logic to problem solving. We argue that instead of attempting this change through new tools and techniques, the optimal change is accomplished by a perspective transformation and the adoption of a new mindset.

A mindset is described as an established set of attitudes held by someone. It orients the way we handle situations—the way we sort out what is going on and what we should do (Klein, 2016). Mindsets are a relatively new concept, as demonstrated in *Figure 1*. This chart shows the rapid increase in the appearance of the word “mindset” in English language books since 1980.

Mindsets for Individuals. One example of mindsets in organization research is the Growth Mindset that was introduced by Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck in the book *Mindset: The new Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2008). It has been embraced by leaders like Microsoft CEO

Transformative learning can be differentiated from other types of learning, like instrumental learning, by noting that most learning, the kind that focuses on practical, short-term objectives like learning new facts or rules, usually fits comfortably within a person’s existing frame of reference. Alternatively, transformative learning focuses on developing a kind of autonomous thinking that fosters critically reflective thought; where people become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions. To facilitate this, they need to practice recognizing different frames of reference and use their imaginations to examine problems from different perspectives.

ent approaches put forth, and through the unique lens of the authors’ experiences and practices including being practitioners of jazz, we share a developmental model for developing dynamic capabilities in individuals and organizations. We propose Dynamic Capabilities in individuals is a function of transformation, practice, and individual mindset; and that Dynamic Capabilities for organizations is a function of structure, design, and leadership mindset.

Transformative Learning

To understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the social unrest of 2020 on individuals and organizations, we look to Mezirow’s (1997) theory of transformative learning. These momentous disruptions are activating events where people are finding themselves re-evaluating their beliefs, their jobs and the reputation of organizations. They produce a disorienting

revising the perceptions of our own experiences that impact how we see the world.

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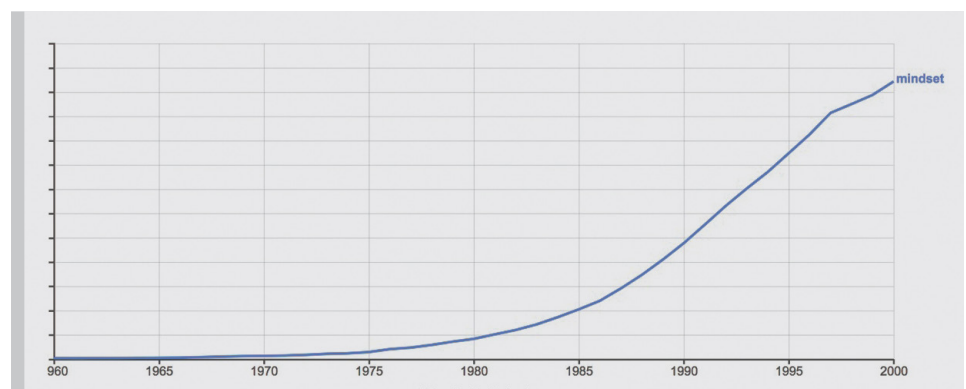


Figure 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer graph of the appearance of the word mindset

Satya Nadella as part of a culture transformation at Microsoft (Stewart & Lebowitz, 2020). Dweck’s research shows that people who embrace growth mindsets learn more, learn it more quickly and view challenges and failures as opportunities to improve their learning and skills (Dweck, 2008).

Another mindset approach to organizational change is called integrated thinking. It is an alternative to the conventional “either/or” mode of thinking and introduces the concept of “both/and.” The idea is that instead of choosing between one idea at the expense of the other, the goal is to resolve the tension creatively through the generation of new ideas that contain elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each (Martin, 2009).

Mindsets for Organizations. The concept of mindset is also applicable to organizations. An example of this is design thinking, the non-linear, iterative, process approach to problem solving that seeks to understand users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems and create innovative solutions to prototype and test. Companies like Apple, Target, Nike, IKEA and others have been successful in using design thinking as a way to differentiate their brand and create value for their customers and their organizations.

There are many similarities among these different mindset approaches. They all employ a different kind of logic to solving problems, they are particularly well suited for situations involving complex, messy problems, and acquiring them involves some sort of transformation.

The Jazz Mindset

Another less explored mindset that is highly relevant to developing dynamic capabilities is the Jazz Mindset. Several notable organization scholars have explored how jazz performance and improvisation can be used as a metaphor for practice and organizing. This is explained through the commonalities that exist between the desired characteristics of 21st century organizations and the characteristics associated with the performance of jazz. These include things like being flexible,

adaptable, responsive to the environment, loose boundaries, and minimal hierarchy (Hatch, 1998). This has led to a body of scholarly work connecting jazz to organizational learning (Barrett, 1998), strategic change and dynamic capabilities (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011), organizing (Pasmore, 1998), Satchmo’s Paradox (Vaill, 1989), and improvisation and organizational analysis (Weick, 1998).

Bernstein and Barrett (2011) explored how leaders can adopt a jazz mindset to maximize learning, respond to short-term emergent opportunities, and simultaneously strengthen longer term dynamic capabilities of individuals and organizations. They identified seven elements of the jazz mindset that promote the development of dynamic capabilities, they are 1) provocative competence, 2) affirmative mindset, 3) leap in and take action, 4) embracing errors as a source of learning, 5) minimal structures that allow maximum flexibility, 6) hanging out, 7) alternating between soloing and performing.

There are no silos in jazz groups. No one is told to “stay in their lane.” Instead, there are concrete and joint experiences that involve routines among group members that, in a workplace, constitute things like working together to fix specific problems and participating in a design process. These experiences enhance innovation by breaking down silos and the individual thought worlds found in them. A regular practice of concrete, joint experiences can create a common base of knowledge and a shared language that facilitates communication among people who are functionally distinct. *Table 1* illustrates the holistic transformation required to move from a traditional mindset to the jazz mindset.

A Developmental Model for Dynamic Capabilities

The difficult question that arises in the transformation from a “traditional mindset” to the Jazz Mindset is; how does this transformation occur? We argue this

Table 1. Comparing elements of a traditional mindset with a jazz mindset

“Traditional” Mindset	Jazz Mindset
“Rulebook” Norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> control, formalization, routine agenda driven activity 	Provocative Competence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> disruption is expected and welcome unlearning routines
Find ‘the’ solution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assumes there is one right answer 	Embracing errors as a source of learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> there are multiple right answers
Hierarchy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> control and structure rules, regulations 	Minimal Structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> allowing maximum flexibility
Assigned Tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> organized structurally within silos 	Distributed Task <ul style="list-style-type: none"> leap in, take action
Meeting in Conference Rooms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> formal, sterile environment 	Hanging Out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> unstructured environment/creative space
Inconsistent Contribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No explicit expectation of significant input or contribution 	Alternating between soloing and supporting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance and high levels of contribution are assumed by members and expected by the group

Table 2: *The linkages between post-crisis organizational challenges, elements of the Jazz Mindset and theory for Transformative Learning.*

Post-Crisis Organization Challenges	Jazz Mindset	Transformative Learning
A diverse set of specialists operating in a turbulent environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking turns: Leading and following • Followership: Supporting others to think out loud and to be their best 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals and leadership engaging in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus.
Letting go of “business as usual.” Recognizing how patterns and routines are largely unconscious. Then relearning in light of the change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realizing that routines are blocks to learning • Deliberately disrupting the routines as a way of “unlearning” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical self-reflection: Questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important.
Simultaneously formulating and implementing strategy. Coming up with responses without well-thought-out plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leap in, take action • Using errors as a source of learning • Maximizing diversity • Inviting embellishment • Encouraging exploration and experimentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of options or new roles, relationships and actions. • Being open and exploring alternative viewpoints and perspectives.
Having uncertainty of outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirmative mindset – holding a positive image of what others are capable of • Affirmative belief that a solution exists and that something positive will emerge • Tolerate and encourage dissent and debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. • Taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it. • Revising assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified.
Creating the future with their actions, as it unfolds, consistent with transformed perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practicing dynamic capabilities • Minimum structure that allows maximum flexibility • Pursuing mastery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.

transformation can be understood by linking practices from the Jazz Mindset (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011) to Transformative Learning Action Steps (Calleja, 2014; Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 1997).

The process of transformative learning involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it. It is rooted in a common learning experience and takes place through discovery and the imaginative use of metaphors to solve and redefine problems and it is practiced through participation in interactive group deliberation and problem solving (Mezirow, 1997).

Linking elements of the Jazz Mindset to transformative learning is useful because to be successful, jazz groups require a commitment to a mindset, a culture, practices and structures, and a leadership framework that is very similar to what it takes to foster dynamic capabilities in organizations (Barrett, 2012; Bernstein & Barrett, 2011).

In the highly dynamic structure of jazz groups, the rules of practice take on the character of dynamic capabilities with processes that are simple, experiential, and iterative, as opposed to complicated, analytic, and linear. Situation-specific knowledge is created and applied in the context of simple boundary and priority setting rules (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

Mistakes also play a role in transformative learning and the evolution of dynamic capabilities. Low-stakes, small errors contribute to effective learning by providing the greatest motivation to learn, causing individuals to pay greater attention to the process, and lowering the defensiveness that impedes learning.

These processes are consistent with the Jazz Mindset which embodies things like “provocative competency,” the deliberate disruption of routines; use of improvisation; a bias for jumping into novel situations with an “openness to new opportunities and willingness to respond to the world as it evolves”; letting go and attempting new and unfamiliar actions; maximizing autonomy while operating

with minimal constraints; and embracing “errors as a source of learning” (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011, p. 78).

The context in which jazz groups regularly practice and perform mirrors the challenges of a post-crisis organization; a diverse set of specialists operating in a turbulent environment; needing to process large amounts of information in real time; simultaneously formulating and implementing strategy; coming up with answers without well-thought-out plans; having uncertainty of outcomes; and creating the future with their actions, as it unfolds (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011).

Table 2 (see page 32) illustrates the linkage between the challenges facing post-crisis organizations; elements of the Jazz Mindset (Bernstein & Barrett, 2011), and corresponding steps for Transformative Learning (Calleja, 2014; Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 1997).

The Cole Meyer Development Model for Creating Dynamic Capabilities

The Cole Meyer Development Model addresses the previously mentioned “how” gap by organizing the elements of transformation and the jazz mindset into a model that creates insights into ways to develop dynamic capabilities in individuals and organizations.

It is not necessary to have prior music training or play jazz to adopt a jazz mindset. The model is best understood using Kurt Lewin’s constructive method rule that helps to “create concepts, however intangible, that seem necessary for explanation” (Gold, 1992, p. 69). It takes a very pragmatic stance, looking to represent the interrelationships and connections between people and their environment with an eye towards action (Neumann, 2005). In order to preserve wide applicability at this early stage of its development, the proposed model for creating dynamic capabilities is intended to be suggestive rather than highly precise.

We propose that Dynamic Capabilities (DC) in individuals is a function of transformation, practice and individual mindset: $DC_i = f(t,p,i)$. The formula is meant to represent the relationship between dynamic

capabilities in individuals and an investment in a sustained pattern of activity with deliberate learning efforts that allow people to change and adapt.

We propose that that Dynamic Capabilities (DC) for organizations is a function of structure, design and leadership mindset: $DC_o = f(s,d,l)$. This formula represents the relationship between dynamic capabilities in organizations and ongoing learning, and flexibility as opposed to rigid adherence to predetermined plans or structures.

The model aims to illustrate the necessity for transformation in both individuals and organizations, and for those transformations to happen in tandem with each other. It also emphasizes the need for repeated practice for achieving higher levels of mastery. In Figure 2, the Cole Meyer Model for the development of Dynamic Capabilities (DC) in individuals

and organizations is illustrated as a transformative process in individuals, paired with structural adaptation in organizations, and requiring many iterations of practice and application.

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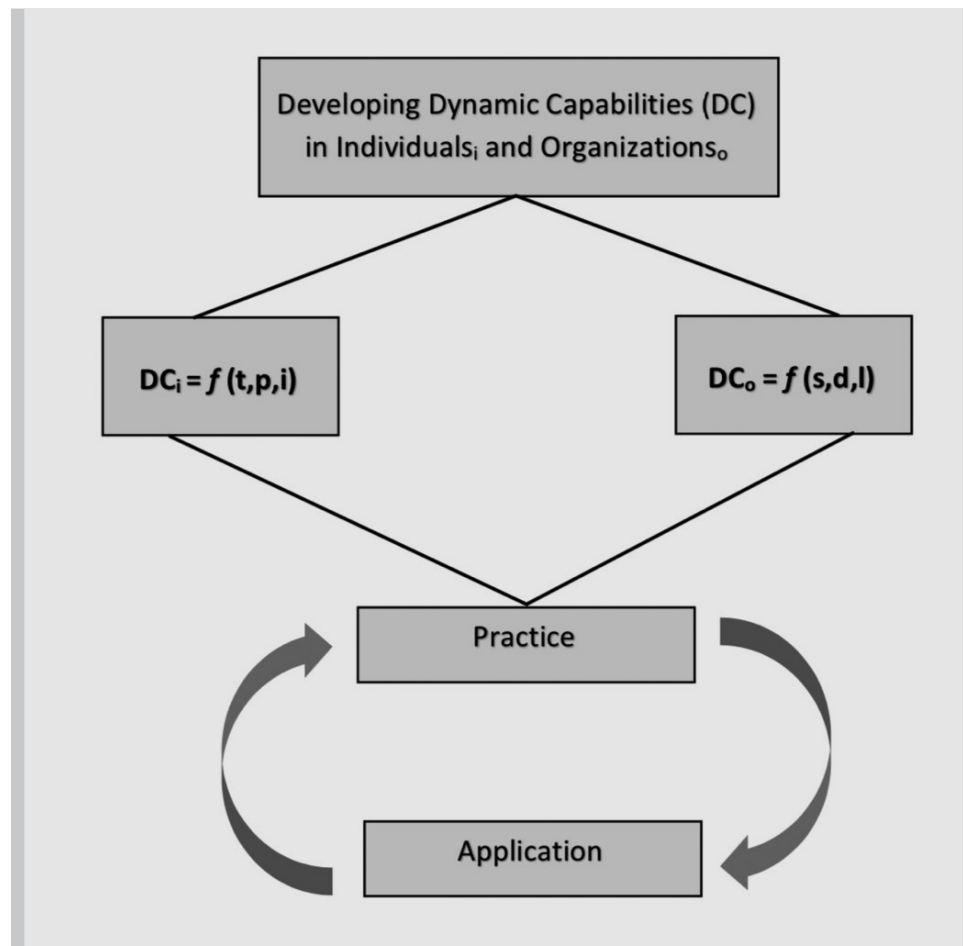


Figure 2. The Cole Meyer Model for Developing Dynamic Capabilities (DC) in individuals and organizations.

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