



Symbols, signs and sex

Love him or hate him, the musician Prince is a master of improvisation, and many of his performances are loosely coupled jams. Yet, to achieve this seamless level of performance, Prince uses significant elements of structure. He leads the band using a series of codes that signal musical changes that the whole band understands. For example, when he says 'on the one, bass', the whole band stops playing except the bass player on the first beat of the next bar. This allows the band to change direction at extremely short notice within the piece, and yet to the casual observer it looks completely rehearsed. Leaders need to be adept at developing and utilising shared symbols, signs and codes.

Compared with most businesses, this is a remarkable achievement. Imagine what would happen if the drummer had to send the guitarist a memo to request a change in tempo or direction within the performance. Imagine also what would happen if they had to hold a focus group to seek approval from the bass player and their family before asking the other members about the set list.