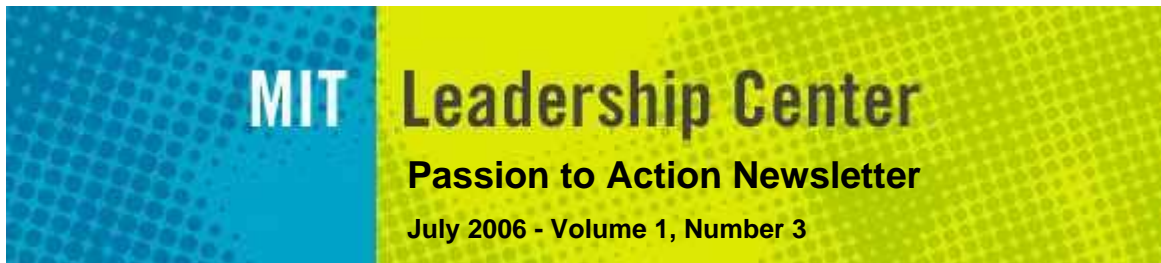


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Learning from Leaders at the MIT Leadership Center

**Taking the long view.** When you take the reins of a giant hospitality empire that's been run by command-and-control, how do you change the organization to take it international? That was the challenge facing [Marilyn Carlson Nelson](#), Chairman and CEO of the Carlson Companies. Her answer: the New Global Corporation, which she presents as part of the Dean's Innovative Leader Series, co-sponsored by the MIT Leadership Center. She argues that the new corporation must have "respect for the long term," so that profits never outweigh sustaining human or natural resources.

**Practicing real life.** There's no substitute for experience, and the most effective business and leadership education uses simulations to intensify experiential learning. Each year the MIT Leadership Center sponsors the [Executive Challenge Simulation](#), an innovative way to help MBA students experiment with leadership in a true-to-life business environment.

Dear Jonathan,

Welcome. This issue of *Passion to Action* features an innovative approach to change management: **improvisation**. For practical, research-based lessons from the [MIT Leadership Center faculty](#), read on.

Jazz-Inspired: To Manage Change, Loosen Up

**Why planning may not be enough**

Are you concerned about the organizational changes associated with new technology? If so, try improvising.

To develop opportunities and cultivate employees' creativity, organizations must stay flexible, says [Wanda J. Orlikowski](#), member of the [MIT Leadership Center faculty](#) and Professor of Information Technologies and Organization Studies at the [MIT Sloan School of Management](#). In her extensive research on organizing structures, work practices, and IT, Orlikowski has found that rigid plans, strict timetables, and fixed budgets can impede ongoing learning and effective innovation.

For example, eBay's founders didn't foresee its transformation from a market for Pez dispensers to a global enterprise. But they reacted creatively to unexpected developments. And the rest is history.

**Don't Conduct, Improvise**

Although managers might see their role as conducting an orchestra, the conductor-led structure can be out of tune with rapid technological and market change, Orlikowski writes.

That's because surprises—both good and bad—pop up, particularly with new technology implementations. Organizations that stay flexible and collaborate, like a jazz combo, have a better chance of making the new technology work effectively in practice.

In her research, Orlikowski looked at the way businesses implemented groupware technologies like Lotus Notes. One customer support department, for example, created a whole new way of organizing workflow and dividing tasks among employees.

**To infinity and beyond.** To change the world, create competition. So says [Peter Diamandis](#), Chairman and CEO of the X Prize Foundation, during his Dean's Innovative Leader Series presentation. By offering rich prizes and worldwide fame, Diamandis attracts "unconstrained thinking" on problems of the planet—and the galaxy.

**From the archives.** Looking for past issues of the Passion to Action Newsletter? Check out the [resources and archives](#) on the MIT Leadership Center website.

Initially, managers saw the new software as a mere tracking system. But user experiences and ongoing learning by doing eventually generated changes that not only reduced employee training time but also improved customer service.

In conditions of high uncertainty, Orlikowski writes, "The maestro's careful direction should give way to the ad hoc creativity of a group's accomplished practitioners, who [improvise within a set of rhythms and chord changes, but without a precise and predefined composition.](#)"

She suggests ways to encourage colleagues to improvise:

- **Experiment on a small scale.** Roll out new technology on a group or division level first. You'll see what goes right, what goes "wrong," and how creative employees react. Based on this experience, you can adapt to avoid or address problems and seize opportunities.
- **Encourage collaboration.** Help people share ideas and best practices—across departments, across divisions, across continents. Throw away the strict flowchart and encourage people to improve practices on their own. [Distribute leadership](#) and decision-making throughout the organization.
- **Facilitate learning.** Look for and nurture new ideas and ways of working.
- **Be flexible about budgets and deadlines.** Reward employees for experimenting. Don't punish them for being creative.

When conditions are uncertain, plans should be guidelines—not rigid roadmaps for action.

[Managing the Three Types of Change: Read More](#)

## About the Center

The MIT Leadership Center is dedicated to advancing the knowledge, perspectives and experiences that enable leaders to transform their passion into action and improve the world. The Center's world-class researchers and practitioners create cutting-edge theory and applied research, pragmatic tools for action, innovative education, and dialogues and networks to connect diverse individuals, organizations and communities around the globe.

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