

Leadership Challenges in the Jewish Non-Profit

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In traveling across the country and working with many different Jewish non-profits from start-ups to well-established communal institutions, I have noticed certain trends. I cannot back this up with research, as I do not believe we have data on Jewish leadership education yet (this being another problem or opportunity), but these trends are too pervasive to ignore:

- 1) Organizations that used to provide, convene or support Jewish literacy initiatives for adults have moved away from these offerings into the arena of leadership development. Jewish literacy is becoming less of a priority at a time when personal meaning is becoming more important as a driver of engagement.¹ Literacy and leadership are not the same. Literacy programs often inspire Jewish adults to become more invested in their tradition and community. They *strengthen the individual*. Leadership programs are designed to create more informed, skill-based members of organizations to *strengthen the organization*. This shift, when viewed from the balcony, may suggest that leadership programs are masking a larger organizational problem: obsolescence. If we create leaders who are better at fund-raising, running meetings and giving presentations, they may be able to prop up areas of decline instead of re-imagining the functions and reasons the organization exists in the first place. There is often funding designated for leadership development but less and less funding today for Jewish literacy.
- 2) These programs are often light on Jewish content and heavy on day-to-day operational skills. Technically, in John Kotter's distinction between leaders and managers, ("What Leaders Really Do" *HBR*, Dec. 2001), we are training Jewish managers to keep up the status quo and to do so more efficiently, with a bump up in campaign revenue and membership. This is different than growing leaders who are engaged in change management and visionary, strategic thinking. Many well-established organizations are not interested in leadership

¹ While fewer than 19% of Jews surveyed in the recent Pew study reported that Jewish law was essential to their identity, many more felt connected to Israel, to social justice issues and to peoplehood. "A key aim of the Pew Research Center survey is to explore Jewish identity: What does being Jewish mean in America today? Large majorities of U.S. Jews say that remembering the Holocaust (73%) and leading an ethical life (69%) are essential to their sense of Jewishness. More than half (56%) say that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them. And about four-in-ten say that caring about Israel (43%) and having a good sense of humor (42%) are essential to their Jewish identity" in 'A Portrait of Jewish Americans,' Pew Research Center (October 3, 2013).

gadflies who are challenging the norm but rather in those who are able to preserve the norm.

- 3) Leadership development programs are often not designed by educators thinking about the pedagogy of leadership - what topics should be offered, what modalities of learning should be employed and in how material should be sequenced as students travel through it. Such courses need to be interactive and focused on behavior modification and expansive, creative thinking, but there are few curricula on leadership that attempt this. Instead, programs are often haphazardly constructed, with a series of frontal lectures given by different people on various topics from fund-raising to strategic planning to using social media for marketing without a central shepherd and without considering the explicit goals the organization has in making this investment. What do we want graduates of such programs to know and how do we design a course that achieves this working from our end goals backwards? Instead of leaving a lot of time and space for conversation that uses the leadership wisdom and experience of people in the room, the person giving the talk has pride of place. The emphasis and evaluation is based on the teachers' capacity to engage rather than on the learners' capacity to contribute. In other words, these courses are taught by trainers and not by educators. And not by a single educator who can thread material together while thinking about the individual development of participants over time.
- 4) This is largely the result of having people in charge of the leadership portfolio for an organization who have little or no background themselves in leadership development. In my experience speaking with individuals in charge of this domain, many have not taken courses in leadership or read leadership books or are up-to-date on research about Jewish non-profits and sociological and demographic studies of the Jewish community. In many Jewish non-profits, the leadership portfolio is a junior position. This problem is compounded by the fact that the word "leadership" is used very liberally in Jewish organizational life today and is often synonymous with donor or very active volunteer.

Larger Jewish non-profits would be wise to create in-house educators, even on a part-time basis, with a Judaic studies background and invest in giving that individual professional leadership training and possibly certification in coaching. This person could then hold the leadership portfolio position and be a resource to the community, in addition to doing staff leadership development and lay leadership development of the boards and committees of that organization. Having a person in-house means that this individual knows the organization well and is committed to its mission and vision. There is a context in which training is accomplished. Having a person with a strong Judaic background ensures that Jewish literacy is a central feature of leadership development and can also strengthen Jewish literacy generally. When an educator is in position, this individual becomes a key asset not only in training people but in being there long after courses are finished to guide and

mentor lay leaders and professionals in leadership crises and through difficult decisions.

If leadership development is going to play an outsized role in Jewish non-profits moving forward, the organized Jewish community must be better prepared.