

From the Sticking Point to the Tipping Point

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What accounts for the terribly slow pace of women's advancement to CEO posts in the Jewish communal world?

Even a cursory examination of Jewish organizations shows that a comprehensive initiative aimed at creating equity for women executives is long overdue. We have all seen the statistics: not a single woman serves as a chief executive in the top twenty Federations. Among the thirty-nine largest Federations, only two women are at the helm. Men occupy the premier executive leadership roles in every national Jewish agency addressing renaissance and renewal, from JESNA to Hillel and from the Jewish Community Center Association to CLAL. Among the major public policy, lobbying, and advocacy agencies, from ADL to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and from American Jewish Committee to AIPAC, only one, the Jewish Council of Public Affairs, has a woman as a chief executive. In the religious world, male professionals lead institutions serving denominations from Orthodox to Reform and Reconstructionist, with just one exception, the newly appointed head of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (Bronznick, 2002).

The gender gap at the top stands in stark contrast to the preponderance of women throughout the ranks of Jewish communal service. Women dominate the middle levels of the communal field and head many of the agencies with smaller budgets. In the Federation system for example, women lead one-third of the intermediate and small-city Federations. Clearly, the "pipeline problem" – the lack of women in senior management positions, frequently cited by male CEOs in the corporate world to explain a paucity of women at the top – does not apply in the Jewish world (Catalyst, 1996). In fact, a 2001 study of Jewish community center personnel provides a telling example. The percentage of women professionals in the overall JCC field is 72%, and yet, the researchers found that 57% of the centers' second-in-command posts were held by women and just 23% of executive directors were women (Schor, J. and Cohen, S.M., 2002).

These numbers are discouraging, and that discouragement has a pernicious effect, for it creates a vicious cycle of inertia. To break through this impasse and create a sense of momentum, the community needs to confront some challenging questions.

What prevents women from realizing their full potential in the Jewish communal world? What are the assumptions about women's capacity to lead? What are the elements of an effective plan to tip the balance of power for women in this community?

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This article offers a step-by-step approach leading to a comprehensive strategy to advance Jewish women professionals and, in so doing, to advance the Jewish professional world.

STEP 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THERE IS A PROBLEM

In 1999, when a group of women professors at the M.I.T. School of Science launched what would become an influential report on gender discrimination in their faculty, they faced a daunting challenge. The percentage of women in senior faculty positions at the school had remained static at 8% for the two decades prior to the study. However, this consistent imbalance at the senior level did not prompt the university administration to consider the likelihood that women at M.I.T. faced actual discrimination. To focus attention on the reality of the problem, the women faculty members conducted a rigorously scientific study. They analyzed statistics on hiring and promotions and tabulated the comparative number of awards and committee assignments offered to men and women. They even measured the size of laboratory spaces (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999).

The resulting report presented such compelling evidence of gender discrimination that President Charles Vest publicly acknowledged the inequity within his institution. "I have always believed," President Vest stated after reviewing the report, "that contemporary gender discrimination within universities is part reality and part perception. True, but I now understand that reality is by far the greater part of the balance" (Thom, 2001, p. 73). President Vest subsequently supported a major initiative to address the problem of gender discrimination at the university.

The Jewish communal world suffers from a similar problem of leadership failing to give credence to the notion that women lack equal access to opportunities and resources (Bronznick, 2000). In 1997, Ma'yan, an organization that advocates for women's full participation in Jewish life, began the process of identifying gender bias in the Jewish community when it launched an initiative to track women's participation on boards of Jewish organizations (Horowitz, Beck, Kadushin, 1997). In meetings with organizational leaders to discuss the findings of the research that they had commissioned, Ma'yan found broad consensus about the persistence of gender inequity at the top ranks. However, most of the executives did not perceive the imbalance as a serious problem. Complacent about the future, most expressed confidence that since women were advancing in so many other arenas, they were bound inevitably to advance in the Jewish world as well (Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, 1998).

Shattering this false sense of complacency and persuading communal leaders to acknowledge that a genuine problem exists is the first step toward creating equity for women in the Jewish world.

STEP 2: RECOGNIZE THAT BIAS EXISTS

Our experience of situations is colored by our expectations. Professor Virginia Valian, author of *Why So Slow, The Advancement of Women*, popularized the phrase “gender schema” in an attempt to neutralize the negativity aroused by the phrase “gender stereotypes” (Valian, 1998). Virtually every one of us is affected by our “gender schema,” the preconceptions that influence our perspectives about the varying attributes, skills and strengths of men and women. As a result, women are often judged more negatively than men. For example, studies of courtroom performance evaluations find that female judges are consistently rated lower than their male counterparts. Female judges are often criticized for strong and decisive action, while the same behavior by male judges wins positive evaluations (Rhode, 2001). Similarly, in an analysis of peer-review scores for medical postdoctoral fellowship applications, researchers found that women applicants had to be 2.5 times more productive on average than men to receive the same competence score (Bickel, 2001).

These studies of gender schema accord with research on bias toward minorities in general. A person in a minority position within a given group, studies have shown, is commonly perceived through the lens of his or her minority status rather than accepted as a full participant of the group, and is thus judged more negatively. In one study, a woman’s resume, drawn from a pool comprising 10% women and 90% men, was usually rejected. That same resume received a slightly better rating when it was drawn from a resume pool with 25% female resumes. However, when the same resume was selected from a pool comprising more than 37.5% women, it received a positive rating. This finding corroborates Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s findings, published in her groundbreaking book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Kanter explored the effects of tokenism on minorities and found that the tipping point for the change in status that occurs when a person moves from minority position to critical mass is not achieved until the minority constitutes at least one-third of the overall group (Kanter, 1993).

Gender schema play a role in every organizational context, and the Jewish communal world is no exception. Many Jewish communal leaders are uncomfortable, however, with the suggestion that gender bias might exist within their ranks. Deeply committed to the language of meritocracy, they defend their judgments and evaluations as fair-minded and objective.

In interviews we conducted on behalf of Ma’yan and Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, many prominent Jewish executives attributed the problem of gender imbalance to women’s own choices and behaviors. They cited women’s reluctance to relocate, their conflicts between work and family, or their lack of experience in certain professional arenas. These leaders are reluctant to question their assumptions, even when confronted with the evidence that women’s progress in the Jewish world lags far behind

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their advancement in the larger not-for-profit field. (For example, 22% of university presidents are women, including three Ivy League institutions, and more than half of the nation's foundations are headed by women.) In fact, while many of these men questioned whether women were willing to work hard enough to become Jewish organizational CEOs, few of them questioned why women were willing to take on the onerous responsibility of running agencies with smaller budgets or serving in the second-in-command post at large institutions. These positions also demand extremely hard work. However, these male executives appeared unwilling or unable – undoubtedly because of their own gender schema – to consider the possibility that bias on the part of male leaders and executives might be the most insurmountable obstacle that Jewish women professionals face.

Our communal discomfort with the reality of bias represents a major barrier to progress. It limits support for systematic and sustained efforts to advance women professionally. Recognizing that bias exists is a key step in mitigating its insidious effects and would be a powerful force for change in the Jewish world that prides itself on its fair-mindedness.

STEP 3: EXPAND THE CIRCLE OF DECISION-MAKERS

Catalyst, a not-for-profit agency that promotes women in business, surveyed executives to identify their varying perceptions of barriers to women's advancement. Male CEOs commonly attributed the problem to the lack of women in the pipeline, and to women's tendency to hold positions in areas that do not directly generate money or clients. By contrast, women executives consistently stated that exclusion from male networks constituted one of the greatest barriers to career development (Catalyst, 2000). Subsequent research showed that many benefits accrued to women executives once they were given substantive opportunities to express their ideas and demonstrate their expertise to men in the inner circle.

Within the Jewish communal arena, power and influence have often been institutionalized as an exclusively male province. This poses a significant obstacle to women's professional profile and self-esteem. For example, advocates for women's advancement within Jewish communal organizations have noted the negative impact of the all-male Large City Federation directors' meetings. These twenty executives convene regularly, and as a consequence of the new national structure of the United Jewish Communities, they wield considerable influence as a group over the priorities and policies of the entire Federation system.

Some have defended the composition of this group by underscoring the need for the chief executives to set the agenda and make the decisions that will directly affect their local Federations. However, since many women hold the number-two and number-three posts, surely each CEO could bring a senior-level woman to these critical meetings.

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The Large City Federation directors represent only one of the many networks that exclude women in the Jewish world. But this particular circle is one of the most visible and influential, and widening it would be a dramatic statement, an acknowledgement that gender-balanced representation in discussion of policies and priorities takes precedence over traditional hierarchies.

Expanding the circle of decision-makers to include both men and women offers the additional benefit of developing informal ties and mentoring relationships between men in high-ranking positions and women of high potential. This is critical because mentoring relationships, many of which develop between people in the same network, are often cited as a critical element of successful careers. In fact, respondents to a survey of women professionals associated with the World Council of Jewish Communal Services identified mentoring as their highest priority (Weiner, 1997-98). This is consistent with research reports from many sectors (Catalyst, 2000).

Finally, while it is not within the purview of this article to make the case for the benefits of diversity in decision-making, common sense dictates that multiple perspectives enhance the thinking of any working group (Gary, 2002). This redistribution of power challenges the habit of placing inordinate responsibility on CEOs, and helps encourage a new, more inclusive model of leadership (Heenan, D.A. and Bennis, W., 1999). Expanding circles of decision-makers to include women as well as men will have multiple positive effects and should become a guiding principle of all leadership groups within the community

STEP 4: BUILD WELL ROUNDED CAREERS

Corporate CEOs have identified the lack of line responsibility or tenure in revenue-generating positions as an obstacle for women who seek to advance. Public relations, communications, human resources and other traditional enclaves for women do not build the expertise or create the track record that future CEOs need to compete effectively for top posts.

Research shows that while men are often assessed for their potential, women are more commonly judged by their past accomplishments (Thom, 2001; McCracken, 2000). In the corporate sector, astute business leaders have begun to recognize their tendency to promote men before they move up the learning curve, while their promotions for female professionals serve as an overdue form of recognition for jobs that the women are already doing.

These habits in the corporate culture are changing gradually. High potential women in the private sector are now being identified and actively supported in their career development. In addition to coaching and training, they are rotating through several functional areas of their corporations, a method that allows professionals to develop multiple areas of

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expertise, and build well-rounded careers.

To advance women executives into the highest echelons of the Jewish world will require similarly strategic career planning and development programs. For example, as Federation CEOs assume an increasing share of the fundraising and fiscal responsibilities that were once the province of volunteers, some believe that women may need more exposure and training in the process of soliciting major gifts and managing complicated financial institutions (Weiner, 1995). The objective is to create an organizational climate where everyone involved is willing to take risks as part of new learning experiences, and where women benefit from explicit, sustained support from their senior colleagues when they take on challenges.

STEP 5: SUPPORT CONCRETE INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

Promising models in the academic and private sectors demonstrate how initiatives aimed at advancing women actually work.

In 1975, women led only 5% of American universities. As of 2000, women held 22% of university presidencies (Arenson, 2002). Advancement for women in the academy has been linked to sustained initiatives to identify women with a potential for higher education administration, to facilitate their entry into administrative careers and to promote their advancement to senior positions. Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), the Summer Institute at Bryn Mawr College, the Commission on Women in Higher Education and the Office of Women in Higher Education of the American Council on Education have all been credited in the training, support, professional development and advancement of women into top-ranking administrative posts (Chamberlain, 2001).

Another program, the National Identification Program for the Advancement of Women in Higher Education, played a major role by "identifying talented women and enhancing their visibility by creating networks of women and men who were in a position to recommend and sponsor them for advancement" (Chamberlain, 2001). This multi-pronged approach, including training, advocacy, education, and talent identification, is an interesting model that has informed the work of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, the first initiative of the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy (Bronznick and Goldenhar, 2001).

In the sciences, the Clare Booth Luce Professorship demonstrates the impact that expanding access to resources can have on women's careers. The Luce program creates tenure-track positions for women at colleges and universities and funds them for their first five years. The appointments must be issued to professors outside the beneficiary institution's existing faculty, which creates a powerful incentive to increase the women on the faculty. In addition to supporting the professor's academic salary, the institution is awarded funding to use as it wishes. Moreover, 20% of the faculty member's salary can be

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used for travel, research support or childcare. One indicator of the project's success is that, as of 1999, every one of the 70 Luce professors had achieved tenure.

In the corporate sector, the professional consulting firm Deloitte and Touche also took a multi-pronged approach to the retention and advancement of women. When the firm's partners realized that high turnover among its staff constituted a serious problem, Deloitte and Touche's CEO took action to restructure the firm's operations (McCracken, 2000). Changes included restructuring consulting assignments to bring every consultant back to the primary office – and their home community – within four days rather than insisting on overlapping travel assignments. Additionally, CEO Douglas McCracken implemented accountability measures that monitored results and evaluated managers based partly on their progress in retaining and promoting women. Between 1991 and 1999, the firm's annual turnover fell from 25% to 18% and the number of women partners increased from 5% to 14%.

Catalyst's publications offer hundreds of concrete initiatives that change organizational climates and advance women. Every year Catalyst gives awards to companies that take innovative steps to recruit and retain women. What is striking about the award winners is their diversity. They represent virtually every industry, size, type and location (Catalyst, 1998). These awards demonstrate that the primary requirements for change are focus, accountability and allocation of resources, all anchored by the visible and sustained commitment of the organization's top leadership.

Leaders in the Jewish communal field have the same potential to change our organizational climate and make our community more conducive to women's professional leadership. But to succeed, we must dedicate real resources to creating changes.

STEP 6: HELP EMPLOYEES TO NAVIGATE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES

Every sector experiences the conflicting demands of professional and personal life. Research studies consistently demonstrate that these conflicts exert more pressure on women, who still assume two-thirds of household responsibility on average. However, a recent study by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center (2000), found that “nearly 80% of Americans report that having a work schedule that enables them to spend time with their families is one of their top priorities.” In particular, the researchers found that “young men and their older counterparts differ markedly in their work priorities, with men ages 21 to 39 placing a much higher priority on having time to spend with their families.”

In the Jewish world – where living a Jewish life, raising a Jewish family, and creating a personal Jewish identity are considered critical to the community's vitality and viability – helping professionals navigate personal and professional responsibilities should be seen as essential (Chazan, 2002). Creative employers who want to attract and retain the best talent

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need to adapt in new ways. The CEOs of JESNA and JNF have eloquently articulated the rationale behind the flexible work arrangements they offer their employees. It is no coincidence that, in conversations conducted as part of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community research, young professionals at these two agencies expressed a greater degree of satisfaction in their work than their peers employed in more traditional settings.

Many Jewish communal professionals – particularly women – have expressed their dissatisfaction with the traditional “24/6” working model set by many Federation CEOs. Their critique is stimulating an important communal conversation about the way in which work is structured within the Jewish community.

Does excellence require relentless schedules? Do these endless hours sometimes compromise – rather than enhance – the quality of the work and the effectiveness of our operations? How can our professionals develop ways of working that are smarter rather than harder?

Here too, the private sector has assumed leadership in examining these issues (Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J.K., Pruitt, B.H., 2001). Their investigations are motivated, in part, by the financial liabilities that result from high rates of employee attrition and turnover. The standard business estimate for replacing and retraining an employee is

150% of the staff person’s annual salary. Such expense justifies that investment of energy and resources to support their employees’ efforts to balance the demands of life and work.

To encourage greater numbers of women and young people to seek professional advancement in Jewish communal service, our organizations may need to rethink the very structure of work itself. In this process, they will discover that the most successful interventions lie in the intersection between enhancing organizational effectiveness and improving quality of life for employees. Everyone in the Jewish community stands to benefit from these initiatives, including our professionals, both men and women, and even our volunteers, who often face similar challenges in using their time wisely and well.

STEP 7: ENLIST ALLIES IN THE TALENT WAR FOR WOMEN

Who can help us win the talent war for women? The struggle must begin with those who actually appoint the Federation CEOs and other senior Jewish communal executives. To bring the issue of gender equity front and center, we need to engage our volunteer leaders. We know that when Jewish communal professionals avoid risks, it is often because they fear their lay leaders. (And their fears may be well grounded on this issue, since Jewish organizational boards are dominated by older men whose spouses frequently do not work and who may have difficulty assessing the experiences and qualifications of female

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professionals.)

It is the volunteers who select the chief professionals and who help them succeed through strong working partnerships (Bronznick and Goldenhar, 2001). Volunteers need professional support to help them understand their own assumptions about organizational leadership and guidance in creating search processes that effectively match criteria, attributes, qualifications and experiences with the position at hand. Imagine the many benefits that would accrue to the system from training volunteers to be more effective participants in, and leaders of, the search process. Not the least of these benefits is the confidence and commitment it would instill in young professionals when they know they are playing on a level field.

Committing ourselves to this seven-step strategic plan will help foster the vision we need to see the problem, the commitment we require to tackle the challenge and the guidance that will help us to develop concrete initiatives. Finding creative ways to remove barriers and increase opportunities for women can lead to important innovations in every aspect of Jewish professional life.

As a result of our efforts to advance women, we can enhance all our professional recruitment, development, training and mentoring programs. Supporting employees in navigating personal and professional demands can improve the quality of both life and work in the Jewish community. Understanding the dynamics of the placement process for women will give us new insight into our criteria for professional leadership, and will help to strengthen our communal search processes. With our commitment and vision, we can tip the balance of power in Jewish professional leadership circles and create a new climate of excellence and equity.

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