

Why Our Work Matters and How to Make It Matter More

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Describe yourself – three attributes. Now describe the organization that you work for – three adjectives. Now describe the Jewish community as it is today.

How closely aligned are each of these?

Picture this: a philanthropist with unlimited resources asks you to set up the model Jewish organization. Let's talk about what its attributes are, focusing on it from three angles – three of the four topics that you have chosen to concentrate on at this leadership institute. First, how would it be structured: How are people supervised, mentored, developed? Is there a CEO? What is the CEO like? How is the board structured? Second, what are the fundamental principles that govern the board/staff partnership? Third, how do people manage work and life commitments? How is the workday structured? Do people work evenings? Weekends? How is commitment assessed?

Are there three positive aspects of your current work situation that you would like to replicate? What in particular would you like to change?

I think that if we went around the room there would be much to say about why our work matters – we are blessed with the opportunity to do work each and every day that builds community, nourishes Jewish souls, saves Jewish lives, supports the state of Israel in its pursuit of security and peace, provides help for the poor and most vulnerable in our society, and guides people on their spiritual journeys... the list is long, and so are our days.

These are really tough times for the Jewish people. As a consultant I find that increasingly even the most committed among us are tired and a little scared and increasingly conflicted about what the priorities should be in Jewish professional life. Maintaining our equilibrium and focus in the face of the terrible world events that wreak havoc with our hearts and souls is really difficult.

For Jewish professionals, these crises come at a particularly difficult juncture in the life cycle of our organizations. For example, veteran institutions – from UJC to JDC, HIAS to AIPAC – had been established to ensure the physical safety and well being of Jews in Israel and around the world. And while we know that many of the essential services these organizations provide are still required, today our task is different. While we need to continue to protect and serve, we simultaneously need to create programs that reflect and respond to the various ways that Jews compose a Jewish life and form their Jewish identities.

Over the last twenty years, we started the ambitious task of transforming the Jewish communal agenda. But, as we try to transition from an organized community whose core purpose was rescue to one whose *raison d'être* is also renaissance, we are confronted with some hard new realities. We are disconcerted to find that even our most longstanding institutions, Federation or The Jewish Agency or The Joint, cannot automatically command allegiance or support.

In order to revitalize our communal agenda, whom do we need to enlist? What resources do we need to tap?

Our Jewish organizations need to attract and involve the support of the millions of Jews who are not hardcore members of the inner circle. To do so, we have to orchestrate complex, subtle and diverse ways to create a desire for affiliation. This is especially true if we want the involvement of young Jews who certainly view their identity in increasingly episodic and nuanced ways.

To compound the challenge, just as we have begun to recognize that each and every person we want to attract to our institutions requires a delicate and carefully constructed individual approach, funders are becoming more particular and demanding as well. Our professionals are asked to pay careful attention to the biggest givers who are often prepared to leave our agencies and steer their own philanthropic course. The Jewish communal professional is forced to walk a tightrope across conflicting priorities of growth and innovation on one hand and demands for consistency and services for on-going needs, on the other. There may be a great new idea for Birthright Israel or Jewish literacy initiatives but you still have to maintain a broad array of educational, social service, and advocacy activities. So where does this leave us?

Professionals are often caught between a rock and hard place – between the unarticulated desires of individual participants and the strong focused preferences of their volunteer leaders. As fewer and fewer donors provide larger and larger proportions of annual budgets, it makes it ever more difficult for professionals to navigate the volunteer-professional relationship. As organizations try to adopt new projects and re-organize, the volunteer-professional relationship has become increasingly fraught with difficulty. Both sides feel that their work is not adequately recognized, and their expertise is not sufficiently valued. Increasingly, both volunteers and professionals begin to work around one another rather than with one another, and so instead of the collaborative partnership yielding greater gains, it often becomes a stalemate.

The delicate choreography of the volunteer-professional relationship is central to the successful practice of Jewish professional life and organizational growth. We need new perspectives, creative thinking and concrete training programs if we are to transform this partnership into a source of satisfaction for both partners and into good work for the institutions where they serve.

But for professionals and volunteers to truly thrive, it is urgent that Jewish organizations focus on the value of training, supervision, lifelong learning, and mentorship relationships for everyone in the organization, but most especially for our professionals.

Here's why this focus is important: as workers, we thrive when our work is recognized, appreciated. We do a better job when expectations are clear. We are able to expand our portfolio of core competencies when our good work is recognized and supervised in a constructive manner. Think about your current work: who congratulates you when you succeed, and who pushes you beyond your stretch barrier?

One of the problems in the not-for-profit world, is that other than measuring dollars raised and numbers served, we have not found ways to delineate concrete outcomes for our organizations and for each person in it. It is like that old joke, when you know where you want to go almost any road can take you there; when you don't know where you want to go no road will get you there. The absence of mutually agreed upon outcomes, the lack of time that even good managers give to supervision in the Jewish world, and the pressures that extinguish the hunger for life-long learning, combine to drive young people from the field. These same pressures cause our more experienced professionals to keep using the same muscles over and over again, rather than to push themselves to explore, experiment, and take risks.

How can we enable professionals to deal with the multiple demands placed on them as our organizations change? For many professionals, the lack of training and development, mentoring and coaching in every arena, not only in the volunteer professional relationship, is a major obstacle in improving our craft. Both in art and in life, learning takes place not only by watching, but also by DOING. We need to take seriously the word practice. You can't learn to ice skate by watching the Olympics on TV. You cannot learn to play piano by going to hear an amazing concert pianist. You have got to get out on the ice and take your falls and, you have got to practice the scales on the ivories.

For Jewish professionals, ironically, learning which should be a lifelong endeavor is often just a product to be provided for others, rather than an essential part of Jewish professional life. This is particularly problematic now when budgets are flat and people are asked to do more with less. Not to mention, staff schedules are increasingly complex and the need for training ranges widely from the need to become familiar with Jewish texts, to increasing ones capacity to manage conflict and handle group dynamics. All of this can be learned but do our organizations offer the teaching?

Some of this learning could emerge from relationships with mentors. When Korn Ferry studied CEOs and asked them to what they attributed the success of their careers, first was their education; but second was the involvement of good mentors. If you ask a room of Jewish communal professionals how many have effective mentors, I think many of us would recognize that we have a far road to go in this arena. Part of it is that it is hard to be a mentor; part of it is that it is actually hard to be a mentee. We can make acquiring

these skills more of a priority when we recognize, reward, encourage, and applaud those who are taking the time to seek these relationships or learn these skills. We can also make it part of every senior manager's responsibilities. After all, what gets measured is what gets done. Hopefully, what gets done also gets recognized.

These mentoring relationships will have a powerful impact on the practice of Jewish professional life. Mentoring relationships not only help people grow and move forward, but equally important they create a cushion of safety, a buffer zone that can help professionals bridge the gap between their aspirations, their perceptions of themselves, and the sometimes harsh realities of organizational life.

Life learning will only take root in a professional environment that values reflection, renewal and the pursuit of personal life goals. We need to practice what we preach as Jewish professionals and everyone from our CEOs on down need to model healthier balances between work and life.

Instead, while many of us admire our CEOs, we also see that, increasingly, the top executives of these organizations are besieged by the overwhelming responsibilities of their positions, not to mention the demands of large donors. Crushed by their own struggle with conflicting priorities, our CEOs often fail to focus on the negative impact of the increased pressures being faced by their mid-level professionals. It is becoming more and more difficult for most serious Jewish communal professionals to navigate the incredible demands of work and family life, and their CEOs suffer from this lack of balance more than anyone else. The result of the relentless pace that our Federation CEOs maintain and the model they represent – that dedication means working 24/7 – is an abdication of any substantive effort to create equitable, healthy and well-balanced work environments in the federation world.

We need to challenge the equation that commitment equals time. It is based on an increasingly unreal vision of the ideal worker – the worker who is always available, who has no personal priorities that will detract from his or her dedication to the cause. That vision ignores an increasingly “new” reality in which everyone is struggling to integrate life and work. Is it new or are we just unable to ignore the consequences any longer? We must acknowledge that the workforce *is* and *should be* composed of multifaceted people who have personal lives, professional lives and civic and volunteer commitments.

We need to start asking our professional organizations heads what are other professional leadership models that work. We espouse the need for Jewish continuity, Jewish learning, Jewish spirituality, and Jewish identity, while our top professionals, especially our CEOs, have little time to pursue their own personal Jewish life. How can any of us keep going without being refueled and nourished? Doesn't it make sense for professional leaders to have time to study, to reflect, to relax, to have fun? This is especially important for professional leaders who are striving to create caring, compelling communities that transmit Jewish values to the next generation

This question can be very threatening to CEOs especially when women professionals –

concerned about the dramatic imbalance between men and women at the top of the field – begin to challenge some of the extraordinarily committed men who have sacrificed themselves and their families to serve as CEOs of Jewish institutions, men who have contributed a tremendous amount to the well-being and vitality of our community, but in doing so have paid a heavy price.

But still we need to be persistent in challenging the assumption that commitment can only be expressed in total devotion of time and spirit, 24/7 or 24/6 – because if we don't then in essence we relegate women who want to have and raise children – women who still as every study demonstrates do 2/3rd of housework and child care, we relegate these women to secondary professional roles.

There was a time when we could pretend that there were clear boundaries between our personal and professional worlds. Now we all work from our computers at home, check our voice mail at midnight, and juggle childcare arrangements from our desk at work. Yet we continue to act as if the balance between the professional and the private spheres were each individual's personal problem. Few of our workplaces – Jewish or non-Jewish – have broken the mold and created a new workplace where we actively collaborate with people to translate time commitments into task commitment. We need to re-imagined Jewish workplaces that encourage the healthy integration of work and life. In examining opportunities to enhance the quality of Jewish professional life, this effort tops the list.

These are some, not all, of the challenges that face us. Now let's think today about six concrete ways we can work together to improve the quality of our Jewish professional life:

First, we need to stop focusing on the power of one individual leader and start thinking about how we can unleash the leadership potential of people throughout our organizations. Are you the CEO of an organization ... are you a supervisor of other staff ... Ask yourself whether or not you are using your position to create an environment in which people can be heard? In which people can grow?

To build an army of agents of change in the Jewish world, we need to unleash the energies of middle managers. In a recent article "*In Praise of Middle Managers*" that appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*, the author pointed out that too often middle managers are merely seen as obstacles to change; and so much of our change initiatives focus only on the role of the CEO in championing change. While it is true CEOs do have a critical role to play in creating environments, one of the reasons that each of one of you is so important is because we know that middle managers who can make the most difference in real change. Middle managers are often better equipped to invent real innovations that work because they are closer to the every day realities and because their innovations are automatically field tested by real life experience.

In Quy Nguyen Huy's article, *In Praise of Middle Managers*, he points out in one large telecommunications company he studied, a radical change program funded 117 separate projects. Of the projects that senior executives proposed, 80% fell short of expectations.

Meanwhile the reverse percentage happened with the new initiatives launched by middle managers, initiatives which resulted in \$300 million in new revenues.

In addition to being an important source of entrepreneurial ideas, middle managers are uniquely suited to communicate proposed changes across organizations. Failure of change initiatives occur most often not in the conception but in the implementation. And successful implementations require clear, compelling and frequent communication. The middle managers have the networks in place to keep communicating the rationale. Middle managers also play an important counseling and therapeutic role in helping people cope with the impact of change and recognize the benefits of change. They also keep the company running. What Jewish organizations need most is to finally balance change and continuity, and that is the tightrope that every middle manager must learn to walk with ease.

Leading from the middle – and developing techniques to strengthen professionals’ ability to create change wherever they are – is one of the most important ways we can create tangible changes in Jewish organizations.

Second, we need to fuel innovation in the face of challenge.

Are we creating safe places for people who might have new and imaginative things to say or contribute?

How are we nurturing our creative class and our tolerance for diversity and pluralism. Just recently a study published by Richard Florida, a professor at Carnegie Mellon, identified a creative class index – cities that do well in ten measurements rate highly in three t's: “talent, technology and tolerance.” According to Florida, you can’t build a community that is a technologically innovative place unless it is open to weirdness, eccentricity and difference. While the Jewish community might need innovation that is cultural rather than technological, we need to embrace diversity and tolerance, expand our thirst for diverse thinking, and actively seek feedback from a wide range of constituencies.

How well do our governing bodies reflect this diversity – are there young people on our boards, and women, and artists and academics and rabbis?

Do we actively reach out to the community to solicit their feedback about our programs and policies? Do we welcome dissident voices and encourage out of the box ideas?

Bringing many the voices into the debates around communal priorities is an essential ingredient in maintaining organizational resilience and vitality.

Third, we need to expand and deepen our leadership skills. We need to work together to expand our portfolio of leadership skills. The hand-out I gave you is from “Primal Leadership,” a new book by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee that gives concrete insight and practical suggestions about how to practice a new repertoire of leadership skills. Here, what’s interesting is that there are many different leadership skills that can be deployed to create a positive climate. Build your repertoire and you will help

yourself and everyone around to unleash your full creative potential, or, as the authors call it – build organizational resonance. Goleman cites a wealth of interesting new research that helps us understand the contagious quality of persistence and optimism, and the ability that kind of positive leadership has to inspire better results.

Use these skills and you will develop better relationships with your colleagues, inspire your staff and illuminate ideas for your boss. Expand your emotional intelligence and you will do more than just manage. You will embody a new kind of leadership that is less about presiding and more about facilitating; less about providing answers and more about helping people become engaged in tackling thorny issues. Practice these skills and enjoy the “lift” from the good feedback you’ll get. You might even organize a practice peer group back at work – with colleagues from social service agencies or community centers or the local university administration. You can practice these and other leadership skills and create change. There is a process you can engage in, based upon a self-directed learning theory generated by Richard Boyatzis of Case Western Reserve University. It has five steps of discovery:

- *The first discovery:* My ideal self – Who do I want to be?
- *The second discovery:* My real self – Who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?
- *The third discovery:* My learning agenda – How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- *The fourth discovery:* Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- *The fifth discovery:* Developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible.¹

Reach in and reach out and you will always grow.

Fourth we need to start rethinking the choreography of the volunteer/professional relationship. Robin participated in an experimental laboratory that I helped design and facilitate – a co-sponsorship between the Wexner Fellowship and the Wexner Heritage Foundation. As we sat in fishbowls and began to hear each other talk about what creates the disjuncture in the relationship and what creates the bonds, we slowly began to role-plays – we could rethink this relationship – hear one another differently, speak differently, communicate as partners, not just manipulate each other. We have much in common: we crave to influence, to make a difference, to put flesh on the bones of our visions and dreams. Yet this relationship is hard – and we are divided by inequities of class, status, money, background, and expertise. How do we bridge those differences? It is not a technical challenge but rather an adaptive challenge, one that requires all of us to feel the pain of the system of imbalances and to work together to reinvent this partnership.

¹ Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., McKee, A. Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA. 2002

Fifth, we need to invent new ways to integrate work and life. If you listen to our communal leaders you will hear a lot about Jewish family, Jewish identity, Jewish spirituality, Jewish renaissance, Jewish renewal, and Jewish literacy. But if you look at our communal leaders you will – with the exception for some on Shabbat – see people besieged with conflicting demands 24 hours a day – from conference calls to meetings, to dinner and breakfast, from committees, to site visits, to missions and reports. When I ask people, as I frequently do, why women have advanced to the top of the Jewish world, the ones who think they are really my friends will say to me: “it is because women don’t want to work the way men do.” And you know what, some do and some don’t, but none should, because this kind of work ethic is not necessarily related to creating good work. Can you think of great ideas when you barely have time to listen much less to think?

Across every field in the country, people are beginning to recognize that lots of people are seeking to find ways to reduce their hours while maintaining excellent customer service and bottom lines profits. And work is being restructured in these settings, from the accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche to the Marriott Hotels. The Jewish community needs to spearhead this new way of thinking about work and life, and we must begin by challenging the notion that time equals devotion.

When we look at changing the culture of face time, we will begin to build organizations that require more thought but less action. While we cannot always control our schedules or our obligations, it is time to use the red pencil for something other than budget cuts. It is time to think carefully about the activities of our workday. For example, what about rotating meeting participation at meetings, with professionals taking turns and briefing colleagues afterwards about critical information and follow-up? The effort to prepare such a briefing might lead to better, more succinct thinking, as it would compel each professional to synthesize the information and prepare the ground for effective follow-up sessions.

As for events – how many professionals need to be at any given breakfast or dinner? Can we educate our volunteers – who often equate face time at events with commitment to the cause – about the relative values and risks of having a mass professional “presence” at every event, in the face of other, perhaps more pressing problems and challenges? Can we learn to assess our activities for their projected value, as measured by increased involvement, deeper inspiration, greater commitment, and expanded generosity? How can we shift our perspective and efforts, to cultivate people in authentic ways, and to engage them seriously, rather than bringing them to yet another ceremony where they sit like potted plants listening to plaudits and platitudes?

You get the idea: We can make a difference when we question our assumptions and look beneath the top layer of our activities, when we take the time to consider the real ways in which we engage people’s hearts and souls in our community. If we ask those questions and sharpen our thinking, we will begin to work smarter instead of harder, freeing up the time of both professionals and volunteers for private life with family and friends.

Finally, we need to use our voices to contribute to the communal conversation about the realities of our professional lives. We need to see ourselves in a larger context – more than just our individual professional concerns. Part of our role as community builders is to build our own professional community by helping to transform the field. If you want to make a difference, set a goal and take it on. You don't have to be a major change agent or revolutionary. If you would like your boss to see things differently, think about small ways that you can use your intelligence to alert him or her of the real news from the ground troops. I am amazed both by the depth of professional loneliness I find among so many CEOs and their experience of insularity, despite their best intentions to stay in touch. Climb out of your cubicle and find out what your staff, your colleagues and your volunteers are really thinking about at night. What would really move them or help them? And then, find an effective, interesting and appropriate way to bring it forward on the organizational agenda.

Most of all, try to describe for yourself how you would ideally like to function in your job and then seek out feedback from your staff and peers that lets you know how people are actually experiencing you. Find a coach, a partner, a teacher, or a program of self-teaching that will help you practice a new skill or attribute that will create a bridge between your ideal vision and your current reality. Be persistent, make a commitment to lifelong learning, and make a practice of change. You will grow.

Finally, think about your issue, the issue that you most want to advance: Is it lowering the high cost of Jewish living for Jewish professionals? Is it creating more work-life balance? Is it gender-based leadership? Is it a new model of supervision or a re-orientation of the volunteer-professional relationship? Start thinking about a strategy to involve some good allies in your thinking; start building a case together, to make that change. Choose your target and be prepared to give it several years, but take it on and get started.

I can tell you as an organizational consultant that I knew the work I was doing in so many arenas would have much more meaning if I fully embraced an issue for which I had a deep passion – in my case it is bringing women into full leadership roles in the Jewish community and the world – and made it a centerpiece of my work. That is why I help to launch Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, a project designed to break the glass ceiling in the Jewish community and to create healthy, productive and equitable work environments for everyone: men and women. And hard as it has been to take on this initiative, this very ambitious project has given new resonance and meaning to every other aspect of my work and life. And in very difficult times it has led me to new levels of inventiveness, resourcefulness and imagination.