

Leaky Pipelines in Leadership: Women and Careers in the Jewish Communal Arena
by Shifra Bronznick

It's no secret that the Jewish communal field has paid scant attention to professional development. Quick to react to external crises, we are less nimble in meeting internal challenges. Nowhere is this more evident than in our lackluster response to the paucity of women in professional leadership posts.

The statistics speak for themselves. Not a single woman serves as chief executive in the top nineteen federations. Women lead only three out of the twenty large intermediate federations. With one exception, men occupy the top executive posts in every major national Jewish agency that addresses public policy, advocacy, defense, education, arts, and renaissance and renewal. In the religious world, male professionals lead the seminaries and institutions that serve each of the denominations.

The gender inequity at the highest echelons is especially troubling given the preponderance of women in Jewish communal service. Women dominate the middle levels of large organizations and direct many intermediate and small sized federations, Jewish Community Centers and local institutions. Clearly, there is no shortage of women professionals in the "pipeline" who are capable of executive leadership at the highest levels. Rather, there is a "leaky pipeline" which perpetuates the Jewish gender gap.

Taking Stock: Our Prevailing Attitudes and Assumptions

In a recent study conducted by *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community* in partnership with United Jewish Communities, we interviewed Federation CEOs, volunteer leaders and high potential women in fourteen communities. The research was designed to create a common set of understandings about the obstacles that prevent women from attaining CEO posts.

The following observations, drawn from our research, summarize the attitudes and assumptions that permeate the system, and are consonant with our findings from hundreds of interviews with women professionals in the Jewish world.

1) An *old boys' club* was cited by virtually all interview respondents as a firmly embedded feature of federation life, affecting executive searches, promotions, salaries and overall career development. Given the persistence of this insider culture, it was no surprise that the majority of women reported experiences of explicit gender bias while many men revealed their bias, usually inadvertently, even as they expressed confidence in the meritocracy of the federation system.

2) A narrow definition of the required *leadership style* traps women in a Catch-22 position. For example, an aggressive leadership style is seen as a positive attribute in men, while an aggressive approach is perceived as a negative attribute in women. Paradoxically, the absence of women leaders is partly attributed to the notion that a woman might not be tough enough to execute the CEO's myriad responsibilities, nor forceful enough to secure major annual campaign gifts from male donors.

3) *Executive search processes* typically involve very few women candidates. Researchers find that minority candidates in any given applicant pool are judged more harshly than others. Studies from other professional fields –including medicine, business, academia and law – reveal that women are evaluated less favorably than their male counterparts. Assumptions about gender and professional capacity can be particularly detrimental to the small number of women competing for significant Federation posts.

4) The *24/6 demands* of the executive job track are increasingly unattractive to men as well as women, but affect women disproportionately. Our findings show that women see these top jobs as incompatible with personal and family life, for which they still assume 2/3 of responsibilities. Corporations and other professional institutions have created flexibility initiatives, both to reduce turnover costs – estimated at 150 percent of an annual salary – and to expand the number of women in top posts. By contrast, the Jewish world lags behind the curve in addressing work-life conflicts.

Waiting for Change: Stuck in the “Know-Do” Gap

We are all familiar with the habit of seeing what needs to be fixed without taking the first step to correct the problem. This “know-do gap” surfaces frequently in our gender equity work, even as organizational leaders ask us to suggest our “Top Ten Ways to Help Women Reach the Top.” While we can offer discrete nuggets of wisdom gleaned from the best efforts in every profession, the most successful interventions are home-grown. The goal of our research report is to launch a conversation and collaboration to develop effective ways of rooting change within our own culture.

Making Change: How What We Think Affects What We Do

A toolkit of technical solutions, including leadership programs, mentoring projects, guidelines for executive search processes and ongoing data collection will be developed. The United Jewish Communities has already announced that it will increase the recruitment of women for its new Mandel Executive Development Program, and it will gather data annually to track the advancement of women.

But equally important in making change is shifting your mindset. We invite you to try these simple strategies to encourage new behaviors.

1) Test your own assumptions when you are evaluating candidates for a position or a promotion. Research shows that women are judged by their achievements while men are assessed for their potential. Try using this notion as a lens. Does it give you a different perspective about a woman candidate's capacity?

2) Open the "club" doors to ensure equal access by women professionals to public gatherings and meetings of your top executives and volunteers. One troubling effect of the "old boys' club" is the inability of women to gain visibility among the leaders who serve as executive referral sources. Examine every public forum that you are involved in shaping. Have invitations been extended to talented women for plenaries and presentations? What can you do to change the composition of all-male professional groups?

3) Invest in recruitment efforts and search processes that bring more women to the table. By actively encouraging women to apply, you will diversify the applicant pool and generate a more receptive environment for women. Design relocation packages that provide an incentive to women – and increasing numbers of men – who live in dual career households. Finally, what special training for volunteer search committees would level the playing field for women candidates?

4) Experiment with *working smarter, not harder*. Consider the benefits of an agency that values task-oriented professionals over time-oriented professionals. Look at the way work is structured and challenge the belief that excellence always requires relentless schedules. Create an organizational conversation about new ways to enhance quality and effectiveness while promoting balance and flexibility.

CONCLUSION

To unleash women's leadership potential in the Jewish professional world, we need to proceed from a new assumption, one that moves away from *that's the way things are* and moves toward *this is the way things should be*. Closing the "know-do gap" and bridging the gender divide depends on our willingness to acknowledge our behaviors and our readiness to visualize a more equitable, enlightened and productive Jewish workplace.

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