

# Unleashing the Potential of Leadership

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*I would like to begin by asking you to consider these three questions:*

*What is one thing you would like to change in your organization?*

*What is one thing – there may be many but name one – that stands in the way of that change?*

*What is one thing that already exists – within yourself, within your colleagues, within the organization – that could help bring about that change?*

Please jot down your thoughts on the index card and then turn to your right and form pairs – a chevruta if you will to discuss this. You have ten minutes.

This conference is focused on how professional leaders can best respond to the crises that have erupted in Israel and worldwide. As a consultant, much of my practice is devoted to working with Jewish organizations on issues of leadership, change and growth. And I see, each and every day, the tenacity and struggle of our dedicated professionals, to maintain their equilibrium and sustain their momentum in these very difficult times.

Externally, world events are wreaking havoc with our hearts and our soul – from the collapse of the peace process in Israel, to the insidious impact of terrorism and the revival of anti-Semitism all around the globe. It is particularly disconcerting that these crises have flared up in the midst of our arduous attempts to redesign the Jewish communal agenda. Wasn't it just a few years ago that we sat at conferences like these, talking about how to manage our changing agenda? We thought we could make the transition from securing the well-being of Jews in Israel and the Former Soviet Union, to focusing on the rich and various ways that Jews everywhere might compose their Jewish identities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We thought we could concentrate on how our own institutions might become effective vehicles for strengthening that identity and building community. But as we were about to leap from rescue to renaissance, we collided with the intifada, the events of September 11th, and renewed outbursts of anti-Semitism. Now we find ourselves lurching between rescue and renewal. How can we plan for our future when we are confronted by signs that we may be reliving our past?

As we confront these harsh new realities, it is troubling to discover with increasing frequency that many of our most well established Jewish institutions cannot count on commanding allegiance or support from the majority of Jews, especially the next generation of Jews. There is mounting evidence that indicates that though young Jews may wish to continue to identify as Jews they don't want to affiliate with Jewish institutions; or many other institutions for that matter. They are composing their Jewish lives in a very nuanced way, weaving together strands

in new and unusual ways which make it increasingly complex to create a vision for Jewish communal life that will attract their involvement and support.

In the face of these challenges we yearn for leaders. Leaders, who motivate and mobilize us to respond to our present challenges, while inspiring and nourishing us with a vision that gives shape and substance to our Jewish future.

Where do we look for these leaders? We look for them in the corner offices of our institutions. We look for them at the podium or on the dais at conferences. We scrutinize the behavior of our CEOs, analyzing every gesture and dissecting every proclamation for clues, symbols and signs. Who is up, and who is down? Who can be trusted and who should be feared? We create myths that depend upon our leaders: Everything would change if the leader would take the right action. Everything would improve if only the leader was more charismatic or more facilitative, more skilled at controlling the board or more open to letting others participate in making decisions. If only the CEO would just create a PowerPoint presentation of our future direction!

But the reality is that it is very tough these days to serve as the CEO of a nonprofit institution. Our CEOs are, all too often, besieged from all sides by competing demands. They are expected to provide inspiring leadership and ambitious vision while cutting budgets, they are expected to develop creative strategy and exercise strong management while curtailing resources and downsizing staff.

All this is complicated by the fact that many of our CEOs don't really know what the people in their organizations are thinking or doing, or what their ideas and dreams may be. For, while every management publication and conference in recent years has announced the demise of the traditional "command and control" CEO, most of our agencies are still strongly hierarchical, and often the CEO is insulated from candid counsel or genuine interaction with his or her staff. But without calling upon the experience, ideas, and dreams of the organization, how does a CEO develop his or her vision? How can the CEO test the intelligence of a new strategy, without knowing what the people "on the ground" are really thinking?

When I have challenged CEOs to take the initiative and solicit honest feedback and ideas from the staff, many of them have, in effect, thrown up their hands, by saying, "And if I did know, what could I do?" Or, as one CEO said, showing me the many emails he receives daily from volunteer leaders lobbying for this or for that, "I don't need to hear any more about things I can do nothing to change."

The fact is that, despite the mythic powers we assign to our CEOs, many of them feel that they don't have the capacity to develop a vision, that they are limited by the mark of readiness on the part of their staff and volunteers to consider real adaptive change, change that will challenge fundamental assumptions, behaviors and norms. I hear this from CEOs every day, when I ask them to consider a new way of operating or thinking, "I can't make that kind of thing happen. My people just don't want change." Or, "I don't have the right people in place to make things happen." Or, "we can't afford to alienate our key players."

This brings me to the key question for this morning's session. What do we really mean by leadership? And, what are the necessary elements of this leadership that will ensure that our Jewish organizations will both survive and thrive? How can leaders enable everyone in the organization to participate in creating a vision and achieving its goals?

To think about these questions I want to apply some of the lessons learned from the business world, from an extensive research project conducted by Jim Collins and his team. On a parallel track, I want to bring in some extraordinary research conducted by Dr. Nancy Ammerman on 500 congregations – churches and synagogues – that revealed the essential attributes of congregations that had adapted successfully to change. What I found so interesting is the similarity between Ammerman's findings from congregations and Collin's findings from supermarket chains and drug companies.

To begin with, let's look at some of the "secrets" leadership that are described in a book by Jim Collins, entitled "Good to Great." Jim Collins and his research team assembled an impressive collection of data about successful companies. They analyzed these companies to distinguish what allowed them to achieve significant results and beat their competitors – not for one year, or two, but for 15 years of sustained results.

In the process, Collins learned that leaders do matter, but not because they supplied the vision. Rather, the leaders of companies that go from "good to great" created the conditions that made it possible to develop a *collective vision*. Contrary to what you might expect, these leaders are neither charismatic nor visionary – they are fiercely ambitious for their companies, but they don't focus on putting their own visions front and center. Instead, they make sure that they have the right people on the team from the beginning, and they locate those people properly, to maximize their potential. Matching the right people to the right responsibilities turns out to be an important activity of leadership. Once people are in place, the leader mobilizes the power of the group to determine where the company ought to be going and what they should be doing to get there. As these "good to great" companies face serious challenges in the marketplaces, their humble but ambitious CEOs will depend upon that team to confront the brutal realities about external conditions, assess internal strengths and weaknesses and respond to the risks or opportunities posed by their competitors. Sometimes these companies face potentially devastating challenges. The CEO works hard to create a climate where the company's professionals can face squarely the harshest scenarios; at the same time, Collin's CEOs distinguish themselves by retaining and conveying a powerful faith in their companies ability ultimately to prosper and grow – perhaps, not quickly, but always, over the long haul.

"Good to great" leaders don't push for consensus or try to create false unanimity at the beginning. Quite the opposite: they encourage debate and cultivate controversy, in the service of the company's goals. They grow expertise and wisdom from within, and as a result, the company emerges with an authentic vision of what it is uniquely suited to produce or do. With just two caveats – this unique ability must be financially viable and must be something that the people in the company are passionate about doing. It sounds like a simple strategy, exercised by mundane-sounding companies, with CEOs who don't make news, but it is a strategy for success, for at least fifteen years.

Similarly, when Dr. Nancy Ammerman analyzes the key differences between those congregations that declined as a result of changing conditions and those that thrived, she found that adapting organizations really notice what is going on around them and they are very honest and courageous in their self-assessment of both the challenges that face them and their capacity to meet them.

What can Jewish organizations learn from companies that have gone from “good to great” and from congregations that have successfully adapted to change?

*First: Cultivate genuine curiosity.* Curiosity motivates us to seek ideas and counsel from every source. In our efforts to appear effective, we often act as if we need to provide all the answers. But to lead effectively, you need to frame good questions that evoke good thinking. The only way to give colleagues an incentive to express their thoughts is by letting them know we are interested and by creating opportunities for new ideas to emerge. There has to be real integrity in the interaction: you are asking because you are truly intrigued by what you may discover.

*Second: Bring a spirit of experimentation to organizational life.* Take a chance on your own creativity. Experiment with others. Build a network of trust with your peers to help you practice new behaviors and to play with new ideas. Too many times, we are rewarded in the workplace for using the same muscles again and again. We amplify our strengths for the good of the organization, but in the process we limit our learning and creativity. This in turn calcifies our organizations whose professionals need to be retrained to pilot small change initiatives, a practice which will in turn restore institutional flexibility and nimbleness. It is no surprise that Nancy Ammerman found that the most successful congregations were those that encouraged playful experimentation even in the face of stress and pressure.

*Third: Be willing to confront the brutal realities of your situation.* And be strategic about what you plan to do as a result. If you want to advocate for change, evaluate critical factors like timing, the likelihood of success and the consequence of failure. But also think broadly about the potential danger inherent in letting things remain status quo. To create a climate that is conducive to “honest self-assessment,” we have to be open to the feedback of others, to listen hard – athletically – to our colleagues, our peers, and our mentors. That is why it is so important to build a network of trust, and why we must carve out time for reflection into our very active work lives.

What else does it take to go from good to great? *The fourth point is, be open to diverse points of view.* At the heart of every leadership theory is the idea of embracing the conflict that is inevitable when we open ourselves to differing points of view. Embracing conflict is one of the critical variables that determine whether organizations will thrive in our rapidly changing world – whether it is Jim Collins studying supermarkets and drug companies or Nancy Ammerman studying congregations. We also find it in Debra Meyerson’s book, “Tempered Radicals,” which studied the ways that we can explicitly use our differences – differences in gender, race, ethnicity and sexual preference – to inspire change at work. We find this in Ron Heifetz’s theory of adaptive leadership when he advises us to orchestrate conflict – because we can’t learn by looking in a mirror.

Yet, how many of us come into our organizations and say: “I can’t wait to go in and orchestrate conflict.” No! Usually, we go to work and say, “How can we keep all our stakeholders satisfied and productive and engaged?” Those are good goals, but they are the goals of managers who want to operate *good enough* organizations. They will not move us forward into a healthy future. They will not motivate us to exercise leadership that will take us from *good* to *great*.

We also need to find a way to be *practical visionaries* and to identify and support the other practical visionaries in our organizations. The practical visionaries – the people most likely to be the real catalysts for organizational change – are often not found at the highest ranks. No, you find them right in the middle.

That’s right. We need to focus on *middle managers as agents of change*. While it is true that CEOs have a critical role to play in creating the contexts for change – by making sure that their principles are enacted in the realities of the workplace, we know that it is middle managers who can make the greatest difference. They are closer to the everyday realities of their organizations, and thus their innovations have the benefit of “field testing” in their offices and departments. In the *Harvard Business Review* article, “In Praise of Middle Managers,” researcher Quy Nguyen Huy notes that, in one large telecommunications company, a large-scale change program funded 117 separate projects. Of the projects that senior executives had proposed, 80% fell short of expectations or failed completely. Meanwhile 80% of projects initiated by middle managers succeeded, bringing in at least \$300 million in annual profits.

Middle managers also are uniquely suited to communicating proposed changes across organizations. Change initiatives usually fail in the implementation phase. Successful implementation requires clear, compelling and frequent communication. In fact, for adults to learn something that is fundamentally new, they must hear it at least 30 times, from multiple sources. Middle managers have the capacity to excel in this phase of change because they already have communications networks in place. Finally, middle managers play an important counseling and therapeutic role with the staff. Change can be anxiety provoking or even traumatic. Senior executives tend to be too removed from the staff to help, and their focus is often on the external rather the inside. But middle managers have to find way to keep their staff motivated and functioning in the face of major transitions. To do it, they get up close to the psychological aspects and impact of change.

What Jewish organizations need most is to balance change and continuity. By “leading from the middle,” middle managers can model this balancing act and encourage others to join them in unleashing the potential of their organizations for change.

In thinking about the special role to be played by middle managers in change initiatives, it is worth considering the changes that came about in corporate life when women entered middle management positions in record numbers. It is no coincidence that, soon after, there was news from the corporate front – corporations were becoming less hierarchical and more collaborative, saying good-bye to “control and command leadership” and breaking down departmental silos, in order to create new cross-disciplinary teams. As some women moved up from middle management to CEO posts they often used this same approach. An influential study published by Judy Rosener in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1991 demonstrated that even women CEOs

showed a preference for leading through collaboration, communication, consensus building, coaching, and sharing credit.

I am not arguing that women are more caring than men. But I am suggesting that some of these management trends may have resulted from the experiences of women who, as they were climbing the corporate ladder, didn't have the same access to resources as their male counterparts. As the newest entrants in the field, with less power and authority, they sought to create collegial networks and did so by creating interdisciplinary meeting grounds for exchanging ideas and information. For example, one woman executive created a club for professionals, an informal gathering of people who had access to knowledge that she needed. She had no authority over the participants, but because she made the meeting useful and enjoyable, people attended.

Rosener observed that the women CEOs sought opportunities for interactive participation and regularly solicited feedback. When Rosener probed their motivation for adapting a consultative leadership style, several women said that bringing people from different parts of the company generated more ideas and ultimately, a better strategy and workplan.

Similarly, 30 years of research in the legislative arena has given credence to the hypothesis that women leaders tend to operate differently than their male colleagues. Among the key findings – women legislators are more responsive to their constituents' requests. Researcher Lyn Kathelene studied the ways in which men and women legislators chaired committees; she found that male chairs frequently took the floor away from speakers and interrupted to make substantive points. By contrast, women legislators interrupted less, took fewer turns and used their authority to facilitate broad inclusive group discussion. Women legislators also were found to formulate policy by reaching out to broader circles than their male colleagues, to inform their thinking. Even the categories of informants offered by men and women differed. Here were six categories of informants cited only by male legislators: advisors, clients, consultants, experts, industry, someone. Contrast this with six resources listed only by female state legislators in this study: citizens, community, country district, parents, and world.

These women CEOs and legislators that I have been describing may remind you of the “good-to-great” leaders I described earlier, who brought the right people together, who encouraged controversy and wrestling with diverse perspectives to arrive at their ultimate vision. By getting a new perspective on our responsibilities, by breaking down the barriers, by creating more diverse working groups, and by developing our leadership wherever we are, we can transform Jewish organizations into a magnet for passionate and productive professionals and volunteers.

We need to adapt new habits and practice new behaviors. We need to become as comfortable with diversity as we are with unity. We are already quite competent at managing conflict and reaching consensus; now we must add to our portfolio of skills and become equally adept at orchestrating constructive controversy, and protecting dissenters. We excel at giving speeches and testimonials; now we need to improve our capacity to listen and to facilitate. We have a bias for action; we need to integrate it with opportunities for reflections. Our penchant for teaching must be rooted in a passion for learning. Most important, we must be willing to

practice, to pilot, to experiment, secure in the knowledge that sometimes we will fail, but that always succeeding can be the greatest failure of all.

We will always have leaders and many of them are quite good. But what will make this organized Jewish community go from good to great is when we stop looking at leaders and start looking for leadership wherever we are.