

The Development of

PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

in the Jewish Community

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The Jewish community offers both considerable challenge and diverse opportunity for individuals choosing to develop careers as Jewish educators, rabbis, and communal professionals.

The challenge is to help shape the future of that community by contributing professionally to establish and sustain effective synagogues, schools, community centers, camps, social service programs, federations, grant making foundations, and other Jewish institutions and organizations.

The opportunity is to help meet a growing demand for well-trained and professionally-committed individuals who will serve that Jewish community in such roles as rabbis, synagogue administrators, day school and religious school teachers and principals, recreation and camp counselors, librarians, social and case workers, federation managers and fund raisers, foundation officers, public relations and media specialists, and other types of community workers.

This study examines the issues of professional development: Why is “professional development” important for Jewish community organizations and the Jewish educators and communal professionals who staff them? What will ensure a steady and adequate supply of individuals committed to Jewish community work?

What are the issues of recruitment and retention for Jewish educators and communal professionals? Why are people attracted to such careers, and what disincentives keep people away? Is the Jewish community getting its share of “the best and the brightest?”

What is the state of “preservice” training (before entering the profession) for entry-level Jewish educators and communal professionals? What provisions are in place for “inservice” continuing education (after assuming work responsibilities) to assist communal professionals in updating and upgrading their performance and facilitating career advancement? How does accountability affect professional employment? What are the leadership issues?

Jewish nonprofit organizations, like most non-profits in the United States, are operated by professionals. Jewish organizations are only as good as the people who staff and run them. Yet, not enough trained and qualified people are being attracted to or recruited to Jewish community careers. There is a persistent undersupply of well-trained and experienced Jewish educators and communal professionals. Moreover, there is no “reserve” or pool of qualified candidates for most professional vacancies. This leads organizations to “raid” others rather than bringing in new and upcoming people.

1 Many Jewish organizations neglect to adequately supervise or mentor their professionals. Entry and mid-level professionals are not systematically counseled and nurtured so that they can more effectively grow into their roles and learn to handle the inevitable pressures and crises of Jewish organizational life.

To create true professions, and not ones in name only, Jewish communities need to create career paths and opportunities for promotion and advancement, such as those which exist in other professions. Individuals contemplating making their career investment in the Jewish community deserve to know that the community will, in turn, invest in them through such practices as mentoring. Mentoring is almost universally regarded as the most effective tool for professional growth and regeneration. A mentor can help replenish motivation, survive difficult work situations, and offer leadership training. Some excellent people have been lost to the Jewish community because no one heard their cries for help.

2 Retention of good professionals is a major problem in Jewish communal institutions. As many as 50% of the professionals leave some organizations within the first five years of Jewish community employment. “Burnout” is understandably epidemic when there is no system in place to address the problems which arise from working in complex and demanding community settings.

Jewish organizations must make the fashioning of attractive and competitive employment packages a top priority for building stable, effective, and long-term community organizations, with special emphasis on the entry and mid-level professionals. Staff professionals must be decently compensated as measured by comparable positions in the secular and general community. The community needs to “stretch” to better accommodate the reasonable aspirations of young professionals who want to commit to Jewish community careers but feel they cannot afford to do so. A “breaking in” period with maximum attention from superiors would also be salutary. Such benefits as flex time, support for childcare, time and subsidies for attending conferences and study days, and housing allowances where feasible ought to be incorporated to make employment packages more attractive.

3 Tension and conflict frequently exist in Jewish organizations between staff professionals and lay volunteers, board members, and community leaders. Poor relations and internecine squabbling is one of the major causes of professional disaffection.

The tension and conflict which typically afflicts staff-volunteer relations, and which is a major obstacle to improving morale and service performance, must be addressed through professional development strategies for both staff and volunteers. Poor relations and communications must be acknowledged and addressed directly through education and training of both Jewish career professionals and their lay counterparts from the community. This requires a willingness to change and transform institutional culture, with clearly defined roles, respect, and expectations for all participants.

4 The glass ceiling still exists for women in many Jewish organizations, which has obvious consequence for professional development. Relatively few of the federation staff leaders, seminary deans, and other leaders are women. The barriers to women also affect the access they have to professional development, and the meaning or power it has in their career planning.

Special efforts need to be made to address and remove the barriers to women in professional leadership roles. The field of Jewish communal work cannot advance as long as women are excluded from key executive positions.

5 Most communities offer some continuing education activities to communal professionals but it is usually episodic, of modest quality, and ineffective in any long-term sense. So-called “professional development” may be little more than capitalizing on already established staff functions, such as the opportunity to attend an occasional professional workshop or conference. The lack of formal, structured inservice professional development has left professionals to fend for themselves.

Professional development needs to be a top Jewish community priority. The commitment to staff employed by Jewish educational and communal organizations ought to be articulated in the vision statement, rationale, or stated aspirations for individual organizations and the Jewish community as a whole. Professional staff development must be widely recognized as the key to sustaining a long-term identity and service effectiveness.

6 The Jewish communal field is not a profession. The field has been troubled and limited by the absence of standards and accountability. Without standards, it becomes that much more difficult to anticipate and deal with change and transformation, the inevitable frontiers of professional and institutional careers.

Jewish education and the communal professions need to design, implement, monitor, and enforce professional standards or expectations. These ought to become the basis of creating and sustaining consistently high levels of staff performance. The major training institutions, national organizations, federations, and larger agencies need to establish partnerships to identify the skill sets, knowledge, and understanding required for high quality performance as a Jewish community professional. But the system needs to work without new bureaucracies.

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7 Most communities have been unwilling to adequately invest in professional development programs for Jewish educators and other communal professionals.

Given the existence of high quality Jewish and secular training institutions for pre-service training, communities need to focus on inservice professional development programs and activities. The primary need is training for those who are already in their work settings. “Professional development” includes improving conditions of employment, providing decent pay and benefits, assigning reasonable workloads, obtaining relief from excessive night and weekend work activities, an open and supportive work atmosphere, supervision and assistance from superiors, the opportunity for self-study, attendance at seminars and conferences, online networking, and sabbaticals.

8 A few successful professional development programs for Jewish educators and other communal roles have been launched in the Jewish community. Most of these have been started by private foundations, sometimes in partnership with national or local Jewish organizations.



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Individual Jewish communities need to collaborate and network with one another to offer systematic, comprehensive, and quality programs. Nearly all inservice programs, whether or not they originate nationally or locally, need to be offered in local communities. But local solutions can be of uneven quality and tend not to be comprehensive. They ignore the reality that the Jewish work force is highly mobile. Continuing education ought to build on best practices and be uniformly high throughout the nation and not just in the neighborhoods of the training institutions or more affluent federations. National organizations, online resources (distance learning), travel, and networking among “trainers” in various communities are possible assets for such a national system.

Marketing Jewish careers appears to be non-existent or feeble at best, although placement after graduation occurs readily. Many job opportunities are circulated by the national organizations that primarily reach current employees. National organizations tend to be restrictive rather than expansive in helping to place candidates for particular positions.

Effective marketing and recruitment to professional careers in the Jewish community is important to improving the quality overall of staffs in Jewish organizations. In order to attract a larger share of “the best and the brightest” a campaign needs to be created which provides better information about and builds a more positive image of careers in the Jewish community. The best time to recruit people for professional educator and communal careers is during the late teens and twenties. But to make entry and mid-level positions competitive, Jewish organizations will have to first “fix the system,” such as dealing with excessive workloads and problematic lay-staff relations.

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CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

The Jewish community has a great deal at stake in the discussion about professional development. Should it wish to staff its institutions and agencies with the best and the brightest, it will need to attract more young people to careers in the Jewish communal professions and provide them with outstanding preservice and inservice professional training.

The Jewish community needs rabbis and other competent educators to teach its children, effective administrators to run its service agencies, and dedicated program people to fill many different kinds of positions in Jewish organizations, schools, community centers and camps. It needs top-notch functionaries to staff the federations and foundations, and to plan and budget for the future.

To ensure that these leaders, staff people and workers are motivated, placed, and retained

will require making their jobs attractive and fulfilling. The obstacles of the past must give way to decent remuneration, supportive working environments, securing respect from lay volunteers, and the opportunity to chart career paths and “plans for advancement.”

Such a paradigm shift in Jewish education and communal careers is envisioned not just for those people whose careers are underway, but also for those who will succeed them in the years ahead. We need to prepare now for the continuing regeneration of the community.

Without fresh energy, ideas, and resources, the Jewish community could be in serious trouble. It needs to do something now, to face up to the care and support of its communal professionals.

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