

# WOMEN IN THE EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

## An Executive Search Professional's Perspective

DAVID E. EDELL

*President, Development Resource Group, Inc., New York*

*Whereas in years past, candidates for CEO positions were selected from among the agency or field's leading practitioners, today's preferred candidates have experience and training in management and administration. Although there are increasing numbers of female senior managers in Jewish agencies, often their responsibilities do not offer them the opportunity to learn the skills required of a CEO. As a result, search committees are looking outside the Jewish community—in government, academia, and other nonprofit arenas—for qualified women. It is therefore necessary to design senior management positions within the Jewish community that will enable women to have the experience and record of accomplishment required to be considered for CEO positions.*

**E**ight years in the recruiting business with nonprofit organizations, following 13 years in Jewish communal service, have given me an interesting perspective on the recruitment of women for executive positions. This article is not a research paper, but rather a review of my experience in confronting the issues affecting the recruitment of women for senior executive positions in real recruitment situations. I believe that the findings of the research will support the anecdotal evidence of real-life recruiting situations reported here.

### THE CHANGING PROFILE OF THE CEO

A review of position descriptions for chief executive officers (CEOs) in nonprofit agencies over the last four years tells a great deal about the priorities, expectations, and fears of search committees. Over the past few years, there has been a significant shift in the type of candidate sought for that position. In years past, candidates for CEO

were selected from among the agency or field's leading practitioners. These were senior workers with expertise in the field and direct experience with service delivery and for whom agency management was a next logical career step.

In contrast, today's preferred candidates are those with experience and training in management and administration. They bring a record of achievement in having led organizations through change. In the current environment, most of the agencies I work with do not have programmatic problems, but rather financial, funding, organizational and leadership concerns. Non-profit management has emerged as a professional field unto itself, with its own training programs, curricula, and degrees. Search committees are seeking candidates with the training and, more important, the experience in this area of management. Programmatic experience is secondary.

Position descriptions usually include the following categories of responsibilities and in the following order:

- **Creating a vision for the agency**—the ability to set a challenging view of the agency for the future and the experience in leading a planning process to set a course of action toward that vision

---

The Development Resource Group (DRG Inc.) is an executive search firm working solely in the nonprofit sector. More than half of their clients are major national and communal organizations in the Jewish community. They also work in the fields of higher education, health care, and social service.

- **Working with the board of directors**—experience in board recruitment and development, as well as the skills of communicating with and organizing the work of directors so as to maximize their interest and input
- **Financial management/fiscal control**—hands-on supervision of the financial and budgeting departments; regular reporting and management of cash flow, investments, budget status and projections, and funder relations
- **Community relations and advocacy**—represent the organization in public forums and coalitions where its issues and perspective must be presented; advocate for those positions with legislators, the media, and community organizations; serve as the organization's spokesperson
- **Staff management**—recruit, deploy, organize, supervise, and evaluate professional staff; implement a philosophy of staff management that respects and empowers staff; experience with planning and implementing organizational change, usually downsizing, and exposure to the systems for those, evaluations, plans and actions
- **Financial resource development**—significant responsibility for participating directly in the cultivation and solicitation of major donations from individuals, foundations, corporations and government; participate in the development and monitoring of fund-raising plans; motivate volunteers, directors, and staff to participate and support these activities
- **Program oversight**—set the direction and supervise the organization's program and service design and implementation

The qualities and qualifications for appropriate CEO candidates are equally clear and consistent in these position descriptions. Graduate degrees in business, management, and public administration are as welcome as those related to the fields of service. Expertise and experience in two areas—the field

of service and organization management and administration—are particularly sought.

Finally, personal presence is an increasing concern of search committees. Although not always articulated, they have expectations that their professional leaders should play a greater public role as lobbyist, spokesperson, motivator, community representative, and fund raiser. Therefore, search committees measure a candidate's appearance, dress, and oral communication and social skills as part of every evaluation. They want their public representative to be well received by donors, legislators, corporate executives, and the community.

In summary, search committees seek candidates whom they perceive to be *leaders*, not facilitators or executors of the board's will. This too, is a change. Many searches are conducted by organizations in the midst of radical readjustments to new financial realities and government changes that affect their program and funding. They often feel that they have "survived the storm" and now must seek the leadership and experience required to guide them in planning for the next phases in the organizations' life. In recruiting CEOs, search committees usually will not take risks or compromise on the central set of experiences they require. They will take the time required to find the candidates who bring the experience and qualifications closest to the position's description.

#### STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN PROFESSIONALS

Research shows that women in the private sector are increasingly represented in positions where they can gain the experience and skills required to be considered for senior management responsibility. In fact, work experience in the private sector, by its very nature, is considered by many to expose professionals to financial and administrative matters. Government and academia are two sectors in which senior management jobs handle the finances, administra-

tion, and policies of complex organizations. These positions are now often filled by talented women professionals.

In Jewish communal organizations, the experience of women is similar to that in the general nonprofit sector. There are increasing numbers of women with senior manager titles, but there is a significant difference from other areas of the nonprofit sector. In the Jewish community, women are primarily holding positions of leadership in departments dealing with programs or services or of support services, such as communication or development. Yes, the positions and titles are senior and indicate responsibilities of organization-wide management. However, the actual assignments often do not offer the women the opportunity to learn the skills required of a CEO. There may be tasks and responsibilities of managing, but the scope of activity—the size of the budget, the number of staff supervised, interaction with trustees—and authority is perceived by search committees to be limited and to provide inadequate preparation for the CEO's role. In short, these positions are not structured to prepare women for agency leadership.

Search committees and executives in Jewish communal organizations face serious dilemmas as they consider available and interested candidates for senior executive positions. Almost all are sincere in their desire to consider women candidates. They are often proactive in demanding that there be women candidates in any group reviewed. In the course of most searches the committees will discuss how women candidates would be received by staff, constituents, funders, and the community. The quality and length of that conversation depend on the makeup of the committees and the professional guidance they receive. Yet, their core concerns always are organizational change, financial management, and leadership. The sad fact is that a very limited number of women in Jewish communal service are able to bring the record of accomplishment in these areas that will give

the committees the confidence to offer them a position.

In our searches we often identify talented candidates among Jewish women working in government, academia, and other nonprofit arenas. Search committees must often choose between a candidate with a working knowledge of and passion for the Jewish community and its issues—and limited management experience, and one with the record of executive experience they require for the position, but with limited professional or sometimes personal connection to the Jewish community. It is difficult to measure a candidate's Jewish interests or to predict how he or she will adapt to the Jewish world. Search committees must also calculate their organization's and constituency's tolerance in this regard. What are their needs for Jewish leadership on specific issues? How patient will they be with a new executive as he or she learns about Jewish issues and colleagues while confronting the serious and often controversial organizational issues he or she was hired to address?

For many years, talented Jewish nonprofit executives working in government, academia, and other nonprofit organizations purposefully chose to reject opportunities in Jewish community work. Today, the Jewish and nonprofit worlds face similar challenges in fund raising, leadership and volunteer recruitment, competition from other nonprofit agencies, and the need to change the way they do business. More of these nonprofit executives are open to considering the professional opportunities that exist and the personal Jewish fulfillment provided by working in Jewish communal service.

The searches we have conducted for major national Jewish women's organizations illustrate well the current focus of the search process. In each case committees have met impressive candidates from Jewish communal service, government, academia, and other nonprofit settings. The discussions with Jewish professionals were comfortable and enlightening as they dealt with the substantive issues of politics and

program. However, these organizations were not concerned with their programmatic direction. Rather, their concern was with challenging organizational management issues that they as volunteers were feeling less competent to address. Ultimately the committees enthusiastically chose women candidates from outside the Jewish professional world, who brought professional experience in managing staff reorganization, financial control, marketing and positioning strategy, and volunteer leadership.

The field of fund raising is one in which talented women professionals seem to have enjoyed an unlimited opportunity for growth and senior management responsibility throughout the nonprofit sector, including the Jewish community. Search committees and hiring executives perceive an advantage to having serious, articulate, business-like professional women as vice presidents and directors of development. Women in these roles are experiencing great success and support for their work with powerful volunteers and donors. Success in this field can be a stepping stone to agency management, and we encourage women professionals to build a resume of achievement in this area. It can provide important opportunities in building the skills and contacts for agency leadership.

However, care should be given because development can be a career step or a career track. Development is an important skill for agency management, but success in this area does not necessarily prepare one for agency leadership. Women whose career objective is agency management must be careful not to be directed exclusively toward leadership in development departments, but instead must assume broader responsibilities in management and agency policy making.

I also believe that, for now, it is necessary and healthy for women to spend part of their nonprofit career in senior management positions outside the Jewish community. These positions provide opportunities to

gain required skills and to interact with a diverse group of professionals on issues that will broaden their exposure and perspective. The nonprofit sector admires and values the experience of Jewish communal workers, welcoming the program, service, and fundraising acumen for which the field is known. Experience in other nonprofit organizations will significantly enhance a women's opportunity to be considered for organizational leadership in the Jewish community. Those bringing different experiences and perspectives to the Jewish community enrich the field of practice as well. Working outside the field for part of one's career is a win-win situation for women and the community and should be viewed as such.

#### CONCLUSION

The key issue regarding women in management positions in Jewish communal service is not the statistics or how many currently fill such positions. Rather, it is the pipeline for future CEOs and providing appropriate training experiences for women to prepare them for advancement. Schooling or continuing education seminars are insufficient. Rather, senior management positions need to be designed to provide the tasks, responsibilities, and authority for women to develop the experience that the community requires of candidates for CEO positions.

Many in the Jewish community are correctly addressing the concern about the limited pool of middle and senior managers in the system. That concern is not only about the status of women but also about the entire professional group and their training and experience. However, the growing number of Jewish women choosing to enter Jewish communal service, especially at the local level as entry, re-entry, and mid-career professionals, can greatly expand that pool. How the system chooses to take advantage of those human resources and provide for their professional growth will determine the quality of professional leadership available for our organizations in the *near* future.