

DREAMS, DAYDREAMS, AND AMBITION

A Parable for our Profession

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In the midst of record-breaking construction of new and refurbished facilities, and record annual operating budgets, the Jewish Community Center field is at a low point in its ability to attract the brightest and finest to its ranks. As the Center field stands on the threshold of greatness, will we develop the personnel to deliver that greatness?

The Jewish Center field is in the midst of an era of unprecedented growth. Record-breaking construction of new and refurbished facilities is accompanying record annual operating budgets of Jewish Centers. Over the past decade, the total operating budgets of Jewish Centers have more than doubled, to a level of \$260 million in 1987 (Statistical Reports, 1988). No Jewish communal agency is more compatible with current national Jewish priorities: providing day care, health, wellness, and fitness facilities and programs; working with the intermarried, the unaffiliated, the new aged, the aged-aged, singles, and single parents; creating an effective liaison to Israel; and enhancing communal unity.

This article is a condensed version of the 1988 Max Tasgal* Lecture to the Association of Jewish Center Professionals at the Conference of Jewish Communal Service Annual Meeting, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, May 30, 1988.

Due to space limitations, omitted is the author's venture into a futuristic landscape ("DREAMS") where new sources of Jewish Center personnel are uncovered. The full text of Mr. Boeko's presentation can be obtained by writing to CJCS.

The author, recipient of the 1987 AJCP Professional of the Year Award, notes that Max Tasgal is "a rare intellectual who put into practice his lofty ideals and backed his lifetime commitment (to the Center) field with pure practice. Max Tasgal is a role model (who) lived, breathed and loved his Center career."

The 1984 Jewish Welfare Board (JWB) study, "Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers," has clarified the mission of Jewish Centers. By so doing, it has placed Centers in a favorable position for obtaining future funding and developing new breakthroughs in programming that demonstrate their competence in this important area. Centers will increasingly become known as important institutions of Jewish value, enhancing Jewish life and connecting their constituencies to many forms of Judaism.

Yet, despite this richness of opportunity, Center staff morale and compensation, retention of personnel, and ability to attract the brightest and the finest to its ranks are at a low point. The field has clearly failed to attract professionals to an area of service that becomes more dynamic each year; those it does attract are often "burnt out" within a few years.

I cannot think of the word "retention" without remembering, in sharp detail, one of several JWB New Worker Institutes in which I served as a faculty member. All the participants in this Institute had been in the field less than 2 years, and the vast majority had only served less than 6 months.

During a warm-up exercise in the first session, the new workers were asked to list what they wanted to gain from the experience. Their written lists were circulated, read aloud, and commented upon by the other participants. The similarity of the

needs of the new workers became quickly evident: "Help me organize my time; set priorities; deal with my supervisor." The reaction — "Right on."

In the ensuing discussion it became clear how relieved all the workers were that they were not the only ones with such concerns and that other bright people were also facing enormous stress on the job. Then it happened. I did not see the face, I only heard the words: "Does it ever go away?" A new worker, 5 months out of school, 3 months on the job repeating, "Does it ever go away?"

So like a pendulum, swinging between the excitement of a new adventure and the voices of pain, the Center field must meet unprecedented new needs, with staff stretched thin and mounting vacancies. As the Center field and the profession stand on the threshold of greatness, with a product so compatible with our times, will it be business as usual or will the field develop the personnel to deliver that greatness?¹

THE AMBITION

I visualize a grand profession made up of proud Jewish communal professionals who serve the needs of all communal services. These professionals will be trained and educated within an integrated Judaic and social work educational track, developed and funded by a consortium of educators, professionals, and national agencies. More and more schools will develop such certificate programs in Jewish communal service. Center professionals will be aggressively involved in the development of these programs' cur-

1. At this juncture in the original, oral presentation, the author ventures into a futuristic landscape where new sources of Jewish Center personnel are uncovered. Of this "Dream" sequence, Mr. Boeko states, "Dreams are many things. They can be images and flashes that disappear and are forgotten, or they can be ambitions. Daydreams are only dreams with your eyes open. They too, can be ambitions. Both require coming back to reality and the fulfillment of ambitions."

ricula, offering Centers as testing laboratories for new modalities of service and field placement centers for student interns.

This integrated profession will provide a broader spectrum of career prospects and an extensive range of settings that will enhance opportunities for career mobility and advancement within each community, ultimately providing more cohesion and unity within our profession. These increased opportunities for upward mobility within each community will enable women in middle- and upper-level positions who are "community locked" to advance while providing room for new workers to move up the ranks.

This ambition will only be realized and the personnel crisis confronting the Center field resolved if we professionals seriously address the issues of recruitment, involvement of lay leaders, retention of staff, changing staff structures, and salary upgrades.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment must take place on three levels. On the first level, our national agencies, particularly JWB and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), have already strengthened their personnel departments and are developing ambitious programs that offer new recruitment tools, extensive outreach, increased scholarships, and in-depth educational programs for professionals and lay leadership. In the near future, they will be developing career tracking procedures and sponsoring more career fairs and job markets. They will be increasing their efforts to reach out to young and old, to help young people start their careers in the Jewish field and to influence mature individuals to make mid-careers shifts to Jewish communal service.

These impressive efforts are to be welcomed. Yet, their impact would be increased by the creation of a unified task force of national agencies charged with the responsibility of coordinating personnel programs. However, this coordinated effort

will only be effective when entry salaries for all Jewish communal professionals are on the same level. National agencies must hear this simple statement, for they must assume responsibility either for creating a new vision for professional leadership or maintaining a fragmented caste system within our profession.

Despite the best efforts of national agencies, the recruitment battle, as with all wars, will be won or lost on the local level. This leads to the second level of recruitment.

An important factor influencing career choice is contact with positive role models. Professionals currently working in local agencies must serve as such role models. They must embody a nurturing model, one that bursts with enthusiasm, dedication, and pride.

Within this nurturing environment many creative recruitment outreach activities can take place. These include appearing at career programs in local schools, developing stronger relationships with school guidance counselors and activity leaders, inviting social work classes to Institutes at Jewish Centers, and creating high-quality internships.

Does the Center field still run "buddy days" in its camps when each staff member is paired with a camper for a day? Why not do the same with public schools and high schools in each community? Jewish communal service is a profession that gives "something" to people through its work. Let young people feel that "something" through their direct involvement in our services beginning with early childhood programs, through grade school, adolescence, and young adulthood. Lifelong involvement must be our goal so that people come to know and feel that our profession creates and unifies communities. Help young people admire those who work in that profession.

Sound familiar? These are the efforts the Center field and its professionals undertook so well in the 1960s and that are still applicable today, utilizing the

more sophisticated tools available now.

The third level of recruitment concerns the image we create of our profession. How we are perceived, the type of activities we undertake within our communities, how well we perform our tasks, how we "blow our own horn" through the excellence of our speeches and our writings all determine whether our image is one of pride, strength, and competence or the obverse. As a student and during my early career years, I was taught that the less visible I was in creating programs and in educating lay leaders, the more successful I would be in fulfilling my role. I questioned that premise then, and I refute it today.

Today our profession is not honored within our own communities. Starting salaries reflect this low status. We have lived so long with this poor image that we now even feel and act as an oppressed group. We urgently require a more visible and public role, informing the community who we are and what we do. Stand up, stand tall, and stand visible!

Finally, to recruit successfully, we must recognize the expanding specialties that our Centers require and broaden our traditional sources of recruitment.

LAY LEADERSHIP

In the past the traditional lay-professional partnership excluded volunteers from active involvement in some personnel issues. This exclusion inadvertently dulled their enthusiasm and both their intellectual and emotional involvement in personnel issues. Therefore, it is no surprise that, when we professionals reached out to lay leaders as the personnel crisis reached epic proportions, lay leaders did not show great enthusiasm for resolving it.

We must revive lay leadership's support for our mission, recognizing that with this enhanced involvement there will be some loss of professional control. However, the benefits will far exceed the losses. With this new alliance we will have completed the creation of the "nurturing environment."

RETENTION

The new worker who cries out, "Does it ever go away?," is a voice calling for help. Many Jewish Centers have become stress factories.

Too often, we professionals find rationales for creating this stress—budget cut-backs, the consumer market, personnel shortages—as if heeding the Marquis de Sade who claimed that once you become used to evil, remorse will vanish. Have we turned our eyes away so often from the painful cries of our staff that we have become immune to the deficiencies of our day-to-day operations?

Why recruit new staff? Why turn people on to our profession only to turn them off at the threshold of their careers? Why invest our valuable resources in training only to have staff leave our profession with sad memories?

The most effective form of recruitment is our ability to retain those professionals already working in our agencies. How can this be done? By providing more learning opportunities within our agencies, effective orientation programs, continuous professional development programs, regular professional supervision, and honest mutual evaluations. By involving our staff in important decisions, policy development, and setting of new program priorities. By creating an atmosphere of confidence and trust in an environment that encourages creativity and treats failure as an occasional outcome of creativity. By executive staff members who are honest and show concern for staff. By agencies that have a clear purpose and identity and by professional organizations that take time to recognize the achievements of staff and colleagues. In short, the best form of recruitment is *retention*.

STAFF STRUCTURES

This era of unprecedented growth has brought with it many changes to the Jewish Center field, including the following:

1. A major shift in member loyalties
2. A transition from being the only "game in town" to being in a highly competitive field
3. A resurgence of the health and wellness field and the dominance of these programs as membership attractions
4. An increased number of programs for the Jewish community without membership requirements
5. A leveling of funding from federations and United Way
6. Increased fund-raising roles of Jewish Centers
7. Expanded early childhood and Jewish day care programs
8. An emerging role in Jewish education

Shifts in staff structures will be required if we are to respond effectively to these changes. Consider these examples.

- Physical Education directors who were traditionally part of middle management will become part of upper-level management, supervising the largest proportion of our budgets, personnel, and facilities.
- High-level management will include marketing specialists who will combine membership and public relations departments and some clerical staff into an influential segment of our operations. This new domain will assume training responsibilities for all staff who have direct contact with our public, plan marketing research, conduct opinion surveys, and "shop" the Center's programs on a regular basis.
- Traditional age-related staffing patterns will vanish, to be replaced by Group Services departments that will develop programs and services based on current needs. They will provide more versatile support systems to the Jewish family by being able to respond quickly to emerging needs and changing priorities.
- More Centers will hire project staff who will be paid only on the basis of their results.

- Finally, no one staff grouping within the Centers will be considered the dominant aspect of the profession. In staff environments where so many different professionals provide significant services, all staffing groups will enjoy equal opportunity for career advancement. Centers will recruit from many sources, and in time, those who display the inherent values and skills to administer our agencies will rise to executive positions.

SALARIES

Many have declared that the only solution to our current crisis is to raise salaries at all levels, particularly at entry level. Although upgrading salaries will play a significant part in attracting workers to Centers, that alone will not solve the personnel crisis. It is still necessary to develop effective recruitment programs and provide satisfying work conditions, an enhanced image, and opportunities for advancement.

Executive directors who have made exceptional strides in their own salaries must devote the same determination and resolve to upgrading all salaries within their agencies. Local agencies can no longer look only to JWB or CJF to provide leadership for upgrading salaries. We professionals at the local level must work with them, providing needed leadership within our agencies. If we manage to find the funds to increase salaries of staff members when suddenly other agencies offer to pay them more money, surely we can find the funds to upgrade salaries on a regular basis.

Often the greatest barrier to upgrading starting salaries is the "domino effect," the expectation shared by all staff that they too must receive a similar increase. The concern about the multiplying effect of this demand often stops the upgrade effort.

No staff level should ever stand in the way of any upgrade effort for, as salaries in the field increase, all staff will ultimately benefit.

In addition to higher salaries, other benefits are useful in reducing staff turnover. High on the agenda should be pension portability and providing services to those contemplating entering into or moving within our profession, including job counseling and job prospects to spouses, housing loans, and financial assistance for Jewish day care and Jewish day school tuitions.

Choices will have to be made. Some programs may have to be placed on hold while salaries receive priority dollars. Difficult choices? Yes. How else will we attract the "best and the brightest"!

CONCLUSION

Must dreams come to an end? Must ambitions be laid to rest? No, let's dream of a unified profession, rich in texture, with but few rents in the fabric of our skills.

We cannot pass blame for our failures on to others. Each of us, from the valued line worker to the esteemed director, must take personal responsibility for success, thus becoming a role model to inspire others. We have our dreams and our ambitions, and we must dedicate ourselves to the challenge of bringing these dreams and ambitions to reality.

REFERENCES

- Jewish Welfare Board. (1984). *Maximizing Jewish educational effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers*. New York: Author.
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