

## FORUM I

### A Professional's Perspective

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#### LAY LEADERSHIP

The Jewish Community Centers of the 1990s will function in an increasingly complicated and turbulent environment. To fulfill their missions, the Centers must not only be directed by extremely competent and talented professionals but they must also have the dedicated untiring support of lay leadership. A new lay-professional relationship is needed that will maximize the skills of each partner, working together toward the betterment of the Center. This partnership must be based on the concept of lay leaders as owners of the Center with a clear vested interest in its stability, success, and future direction.

This concept of ownership is operationalized in many ways. Lay leaders determine agency policy and are fiscally responsible to the community for the operation of the Center. They are empowered to raise funds, build, and govern with specific legal authority. They have ultimate responsibility for the service that is to be provided, the quality and quantity of that service, the method of funding that service, and most importantly for professionals, who is to provide that service (Kaplan & Manchester, 1988, p. 3481). Lay leaders have that responsibility, no matter their level of knowledge or ability. It is just that fact that causes so much concern because it is the lay leaders who will determine whether professionals will succeed or even survive in their careers.

#### LAY LEADERS OF THE PAST

When Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States in the late 19th century, there were no support systems in place to ease their adjustment to their new home.

As a result, Jews followed the patterns they had practiced in Eastern Europe for centuries: they took care of their own, creating the organizations that were the forerunners of today's federated system of agencies. The motivation of this first generation of lay leaders was simple and clear. Immigrants themselves who had recently achieved great financial success, they wanted to give to others some of the benefits they had gained in their new land of freedom. Providing for the needs of their brethren was commanded by Jewish law and had been the practice for many centuries. These lay leaders did not see themselves as needing the services they helped provide; the less fortunate were the recipients of their volunteer commitment.

For the most part, the immigrant lay leaders related to the Jewish communal professional with respect. Aware that they had neither the professional's level of education nor specialized knowledge, these lay leaders on the whole were uninvolved with the running of the agency. As long as the agency was running well, they distanced themselves from its operations.

#### LAY LEADERS OF TODAY

The current generation of lay leaders is very different from their immigrant predecessors. Many hold professional degrees even if they do not practice their profession. They are involved with the management of their own or someone else's money, and they possess highly technical information about such areas as banking, computers, law, personnel management, building construction, medicine, or real estate. They work very hard and are expected to produce in their jobs. Yet,

rarely does this production involve the hands-on experience of running their own business.

Many lay leaders today have achieved or been accorded high status in a world far different from their grandparents and even their parents. They are courted to join the boards of agencies that, just a few short years ago, would not even have served them. The generous contributions that they have been making to Jewish agencies, which those agencies have accepted as matter-of-fact, are considered enormous by non-Jewish institutions. The most affluent have discovered that high status is relatively easy to achieve in the nonsectarian sector. They have learned that, in a relatively short time, a generous contributor can become the president of a major non-Jewish community social, educational, or cultural institution, such as a symphony, art museum, or hospital.

Most of the Jews to whom our lay leaders relate are also affluent. They and their friends are concerned with the same issues as their non-Jewish peers. The great needs of our urban communities, environmental issues, AIDS, divorce, the high crime rate, and adolescent suicide are some of these concerns. The competition for their commitment in dollars and time is enormous.

Our lay leaders work hard and have little free time. Many want to help both the Jewish community and the community at large, and so are forced to make choices about where to commit their time and energy. The openness of today's society translates into pulls from all directions on their time and their commitment.

#### LAY LEADERS OF THE FUTURE

Lay leaders in the coming years will have even more demands placed upon their time, commitment, and resources than our current leaders. They will be even better educated and will have greater technical skills. They will be further removed from producing tangible goods and services and deeply involved in even

more esoteric ways of managing money. Increasingly, in their professions and businesses, many will have little or no opportunity to affect other people's lives, or even to derive satisfaction from seeing the end products of their efforts. They will be accepted to an even greater extent into American society.

One way to understand how lay leaders have changed over the past 80 years is to examine how their motivations have changed. The motivation of the early lay leaders was very clear; they became involved in the Center to help their fellow Jews because that was what they had always done and that was what was commanded.

Although the lay leaders of the future will still be motivated by a desire to help others, their involvement will be fueled by other motivations as well. Because so many of them in their professional lives have little opportunity to affect the lives of others directly, they will want their volunteer activities to produce hands-on gratification. Because their free time is so limited, they will demand that their assignments be meaningful. Many lay leaders will also evaluate their volunteer experience in terms of personal gain, as a source of important business and social contacts.

Because of the great demands on their time and because many lay leaders will move from community to community for career advancement, the schedule for moving volunteers up the leadership ladder will have to be accelerated. The days of long apprenticeships before a lay leader assumed a position of power are over. Volunteers who handle their assignments well will expect to move up in the system quickly, and if this expectation is not met, they will move on to another agency either inside or outside the Jewish community.

The lay leaders will make the same demands on their volunteer activities and the Center staff that they make in their professional lives. Accustomed to rigorous schedules and time management, to management by objectives, and to clear evaluation parameters in their professional

lives, they will expect the same in their volunteer lives. They will demand that a greater emphasis be placed on the bottom line and on tangible results. They will be intolerant of such unprofessional behavior as lateness, insufficient preparation for meetings, and inaccurate information. These greater demands will be accompanied by a recognition of the need for much higher compensation for Center professionals. These lay leaders will feel that the same standards of the corporate world, in which one gets what one pays for, should apply to the Center field. In other words, more lay leaders will want to implement the goals of the Center in a corporate manner (Kaplan, 1985).

Professionals in the future will have to adapt to meet these changed expectations of their lay leaders. They will have to learn to speak the language of the corporate world, to dress like professionals in the corporate world, and to communicate the facts first and then give their expert opinion. They will have to learn to include lay leaders more in the running of the agency, sharing pertinent information and not "protecting" them so much.

If the volunteer experience does not change to meet the needs and expectations of the lay leaders of the future, they will leave the Centers and devote their time and energy to institutions where they feel their involvement would have the most impact. That loss of commitment is one the Center field cannot risk. When first-rank leaders abandon the agency and their places are taken by second- and third-rank volunteers, the agency's status will similarly decline. For good or ill, the place of any agency in the Jewish community closely reflects the standing of its lay leadership.

#### **STRENGTHENING THE LAY-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP**

Faith, trust, confidence, and respect are the keystones of the lay-professional relationship (Bubis & Dauber, 1987, p. 191). Just as the success of lay leaders is depend-

ent to a degree on the professionals with whom they work, so the success of each professional is dependent on his or her lay counterpart.

Yet, although we as professionals may not be willing to admit it, a basic fear is also an element of the lay-professional relationship for it is the lay leader who will ultimately evaluate our efforts and accomplishments. It is not the evaluation itself that generates fear, but the way in which it might be handled. Evaluations by other professionals are guided by certain objective and quantitative criteria for the most part. However, lay evaluations may be more subjective than objective and may be based on different goals and expectations. The lay leaders' criteria for judging a professional's performance may be unclear or irrelevant to the task to be evaluated. Although currently the performance of the executive director and other upper-management staff is most closely monitored by lay leaders, lower-level program staff will come under increasingly close scrutiny in the future as volunteers become more involved in developing policy in program committees.

It is helpful to understand the perspective from which lay leaders judge the performance of professionals. Many lay leaders have a higher standard of living than the professionals with whom they work (Kagan, 1989); the chairman of the Youth Services Committee frequently earns significantly more money than the youth worker. Too, as discussed earlier, lay leaders often look to volunteer work to meet needs that are not satisfied in their work lives. In fact, they are often envious of professionals who are receiving direct and often immediate gratification in their chosen careers. These differences make lay evaluation of professionals problematic.

Yet, the key to a successful lay-professional relationship is to see it as a win-win proposition. Great lay leaders make great professionals more effective, and great professionals make great lay leaders look better still. One of the most

important responsibilities of a professional is to enable the lay leader to function as well in his or her role as possible.

One way in which professionals can fulfill this responsibility is to educate lay leaders about the mission of the Center field and the problems facing it. Staff must be able to conceptualize and communicate the mission of the Centers and teach laypeople that they, as owners of the Centers, play an integral role in fulfilling that mission. They must be informed about the pressing concerns facing the Jewish community and the vital role that Centers play in addressing those concerns. Professionals must ensure that lay leaders are as committed as they are to programs that strengthen Jewish identity, support Jewish families, and provide informal experiential learning for all age groups. As our services grow in complexity and size, the responsibility of lay education gains more importance (Greenfield, 1988).

Too, as the scope and the sophistication of our programs increase, lay leaders will more and more likely be users of these services. Therefore, they will be evaluating them not only as owners and overseers of those services but also as consumers. The concerns they raise should be considered as valuable feedback that deserves a quick and thoughtful response.

Laypeople's responsibilities as owners of the Center should extend beyond monitoring the agency's fiscal health. They will need to participate appropriately and visibly in implementation of services on an ongoing basis. To perform that responsibility effectively, lay leaders must be advised in a timely fashion of problems and be given an opportunity to wrestle with solutions. Furthermore, just as they will share ownership of the problems, so should they share ownership of the successes and receive proper recognition for them.

Yet, it is not sufficient to gain the respect and trust of lay leaders by educating and involving them meaningfully in the work of the Center; that respect must also be gained by the professional's effective

management of the programs and agency as a whole. If management is slipshod or bookkeeping inaccurate, these areas will become the point of engagement for lay leaders who will, in all likelihood, never get past them. For it is in these areas that many of the lay leaders are most competent and feel most confident. All too easily they can focus all their energies on details of management, rather than on the agency's mission of Jewish continuity and the programs and services that ensure it. It is the responsibility of the professional to enable lay leaders to concentrate on the mission of the agency, rather than on its administrative problems.

Too, lay leaders who determine that the agency is poorly administered will lose faith in the professional, thus undermining one of the cornerstones of the lay-professional relationship. Without trust in the ability of the staff to administer the agency or programs, what trust can there be in the quality of its services?

The best lay leaders will insist upon meaningful responsibilities and undertaking legitimate assignments, and the best professionals will become terribly frustrated with anything less. Professionals who are skilled in maximizing the value of the lay-professional relationship will be most successful in fulfilling their own responsibilities. They can ensure that lay leaders function most effectively by doing the following:

1. They will bring the right lay leaders together to get the job done. To do this, they must know their lay leaders—their backgrounds, aspirations, affiliations, and life situations.
2. They will quickly identify real strengths and weaknesses in their lay leaders and move people into positions that maximize their strengths.
3. They will recognize that lay leaders can help in many areas of the Center, and they will be able to use the lay leaders' social connections appropriately to achieve certain objectives.
4. They will work with lay leaders effec-

- tively, building good relationships with them and matching their goals to Center needs.
5. They will be able to generate trust and respect in lay leaders.
  6. They will let the lay leaders shine while they take a back seat. They will understand the ego needs of their lay leaders and have the self-confidence to put those needs ahead of their own.
  7. They will be fully informed and knowledgeable about the programs for which they are responsible. They will also be able to articulate effectively the goals of the agency as a whole and demonstrate how their program is essential to meeting those goals.
  8. They will know how to write, speak, and prepare a budget so that they can be effective and confident advocates.
  9. They will be able to break large problems and group tasks into smaller, more manageable endeavors, and they will be able to move their committees ahead a step (or two or three) at a time.
  10. They will know how and when to ask for help from lay leaders, and they will know how to evaluate suggestions. They will always keep the lines of communication open and face negative perceptions squarely.
  11. They will discover significant ways for other staff to reinforce the identified needs of communities so lay leaders will be helped to internalize and act on those needs.
  12. They will be volunteers themselves at other places, such as the federation or at their synagogue. This volunteerism will enable them to relate to members

- of their board on an equal footing, having been a volunteer in the community just as the lay leader is a volunteer at the Center.
13. They will have a sense of humor and the capacity not to take themselves too seriously so they do not lose perspective on what they want to achieve.
  14. They will use their good common sense to determine appropriate boundaries in the lay-professional relationship.

A lay-professional relationship, in which professionals enable lay leaders to fulfill their responsibilities as owners most effectively, will be the foundation for success for Jewish Community Centers in the increasingly turbulent environment of the coming decades.

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