FORUM II

From a Lay Leader's Perspective

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Four components of a Jewish Community Center determine its effectiveness: its professional staff, volunteer leadership, the membership constituency, and the community. The ultimate task of the lay-professional team is to meet the needs of the membership and the community and to move them, by means of goal clarification and program, to ever more intensive Jewish self-realization, participation, and commitment to a long Jewish future.

The purposes of this article are (1) to examine, and by that examination enhance, the capacity of the lay-professional team to fulfill its joint responsibility; (2) to refine the respective and differential roles of the volunteer and the professional; and (3) to analyze the impediments to lay-professional interaction in order to reduce or eliminate them.

In the early years of the Center movement—when it was a loosely connected group of settlement houses working to Americanize a huge influx of "greeners"—the laypersons were, in fact, the professionals. These volunteers who ran the programs were mostly women. It was only as the field of Jewish communal service professionalized in the 1920s and 1930s that it became a male preserve on both the volunteer and professional side. Yet, in the early years of this century, budgets were infinitesimal; the staff consisted usually of a maintenance person to stoke the fire and clean up. That arrangement was characteristic of most social welfare efforts of the period, which have evolved into today's family service agencies, nursing homes, and federations.

This system of "lay" professionals was still in practice as late as the early 1970s in Latin America, especially in the gigantic sports clubs of Buenos Aires, which are now part of the World Confederation of JCCs. Presidents of agencies and chairmen of departments routinely spent 20 to 40 hours a week making the decisions and controlling the activities of their clubs, down to the most detailed operational requirements. Those volunteers expressed to the first JWB mission to Latin America in 1973 the concern that the younger professionals and businessmen who would follow them in leadership would have neither the time nor the commitment to follow in their footsteps. Adding to their concern was the fact that many of them had sat in the same posts of leadership for 20 or 25 years!

Yet, in little more than a decade, this system of lay professionals was dramatically altered. Beginning in Buenos Aires in the mid-1970s and spreading through much of South America as the Buenos Aires model succeeded, the clubs professionalized. That is, the *employees* became *professionals*, sharing leadership and responsibility with a group of lay leaders who, in turn, accepted the principle of rotation of leadership, the concomitant need for lay leadership training, and the development of a career ladder for both professionals and volunteers. They achieved in a few years what our institutions developed over a half century or more. This process of professionalization was accelerated in part because their immigrant experience was two generations later than ours—in the 1920s and 1930s, rather than 1880–1910.

The experience in South America indicates that achieving dramatic changes in volunteer-professional relationships is, in fact, possible. Even though the problems of lay-professional relations are endemic and chronic, they are solvable and negotiable.

The process of negotiation begins with basic role definition. The lay leaders are

responsible for policy making and the professionals for implementing that policy. That capsule description, of course, is insufficient. No self-respecting professional can withdraw from the decision-making process. After all, it is the professional who prepares the data base for policy development and who presents to the lay bodies, committees or boards, the policy options and their implications. The professional whose board or committee regularly or even frequently overrides his or her best judgment has to examine several possible reasons for this behavior:

1. The majority of the board or committee members are people who ignore facts and rely on preconceptions, hunches, and snap judgments.
2. The lay leaders do not have a clear understanding of the purposes of the Center and therefore make wrong decisions.
3. The lay leaders do not appreciate the professional or his or her expertise.

Some or all of these assessments may be correct. The real issue is how to handle these problems. If the laypersons consistently make bad decisions, it may be because they are the wrong people to be in leadership. They have no interest in growing with the professional and with the agency; they believe that they know it all and have nothing to learn. Actually, as the research on JCC lay leadership indicates, the great majority of lay leaders are well-educated, both in the secular and Jewish spheres. The professionals and laypersons responsible for recruiting volunteers for committees and boards would have to work very hard to weight those bodies heavily with "know-nothings." Remember, too, the saying that executives tend to get the kind of board they deserve or want!

And just as professionals are involved in making policy, so must laypersons be involved in program implementation. Volunteer leaders who believe that assuming some programmatic responsibilities dirties their hands fail to fulfill a major part of their lay responsibility. They must set an example by selling tickets to the next Center play, they must help recruit participants for a program that might not otherwise take place for lack of registrants, they must monitor the agency's financial experience to guarantee that the budget is met on both sides of the ledger.

The recent study of the Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center, "A Profile of JCC Leadership" (Kagen, 1989), reports the high level of education and Jewish commitment of the great majority of current Center board members. Eighty-eight percent have at least a college degree, and almost half of those have advanced degrees. Although only a very few board members are trained social workers, many of them have special skills that complement those of the professional staff—skills in law and accounting, public relations, and business. And, they have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to learn.

The extent of Jewish education and involvement in many aspects of Jewish life of the board members far exceeds that of the average American Jew, and even the average JCC member: 93% belong to a congregation, 69% have visited Israel at least once, 89% contribute to the community campaign, and over one-third participate in adult Jewish educational programs. The most important reason given for their participation in Center leadership is "commitment to Jewish continuity" (76%) (Kagen, 1989). Even more significant is the fact that they believe they can be most effective in enhancing Jewish identification and fostering a sense of unity in the Jewish community through their volunteer efforts in the JCC. Their Jewish profile coincides to a high degree with that of Center professionals in another recent JWB research study, "The Ambivalent Professional" (Scotch, 1985).

It would appear from the research on lay leadership that the first and second descriptions offered for poor decision making—a

reliance on snap judgments rather than on facts and a lack of understanding of the Center's goals—are not applicable to JCC boards or committees in general. Yet, the JWB study, in its examination of impediments to volunteer effectiveness, did identify two principal problems: lack of time to do the job well and lack of leadership skills.

Therefore, the professional must assume a new responsibility of negotiating time commitments for volunteers. Expecting lay leadership to spend 10 or 20 hours a week on the affairs of the Center will lead to problems in recruiting effective lay leaders or losing them to burnout before their talents and their commitment have been fully utilized. Together with the volunteers, the professional should work out a job description, almost a contract, that specifies their responsibilities in a way that makes the best use of their time, energy, and skills without harming their family life, careers, or opportunity for leisure.

The professional must also play an important role in enabling volunteers to develop the leadership skills that they need to serve as an effective partner in the lay-professional relationship. Leadership development programs dealing with the dynamics of group decision making, the Center and its communal context, and the Jewish mission of the Center must be a joint enterprise of the professional staff and an experienced group of lay leadership. Leadership training itself becomes an effective process for identification of future "stars" for Center leadership.

The nurturing of volunteers to help them become leaders increases the responsibilities of professionals already burdened with the tasks of carrying on the programs and providing the services of the JCC. Is it worth the extra effort? Obviously, I think so. Otherwise I would not have invested the better part of the last 35 years as a volunteer in the Center movement.

A knowledgeable and effective cadre of lay leadership is a tremendous asset in the problem-solving abilities of the Center. Volunteers, with their variety of professional and business skills that are often very different from those of the professional staff, bring the perspective of the informed citizen to the table. They should represent the outreach of the Center to the community, to the unaffiliated whom the Center wants to serve, to the affiliated who need to be made aware of the diversity in Jewish life and the fact that, as Scotch noted in his study of professional attitudes, "Judaism. . . is not a matter of 'one size fits all' " (Scotch, 1985). In addition, they must be a major linkage to the power structure of the community on which the Center must rely for significant financial support, whether from the federation, the United Way, or individuals of affluence who can augment the Center's regular sources of income. In fact, one of the main failings of Center lay leadership across the country has been its failure to recognize the principal sources of distress of professionals and those who might become professionals: the inadequacy of salaries at the entry level and up the career ladder, and the lack of career advancement opportunities. To some extent, the volunteer's attitude is, "I'm doing this work as a volunteer out of my commitment to the Center and the Jewish community; you're being paid to do the same thing." In other words, part of the professional's compensation is supposed to be the psychic reward of helping the Jewish people. I believe that such an attitude is subliminal, rather than explicit. It can be overcome with the help of those lay leaders who know how important professionals are to the success of the Center and how costly to the agency and the field is the employee turnover that is the result of inadequate financial rewards in relation to other fields and sometimes even to other Centers.

The relationship between the volunteer and professional is not always smooth, and both partners have complaints about the other. For the volunteer, probably the worst professional offender is the one who keeps secrets—who withholds information

needed by lay leaders for decisions, whether it has to do with an impending financial crisis or membership dissatisfaction with a program or the program provider. Some professionals freeze their lay leadership out of policy development by keeping secrets. They deprive their laity of the principal opportunity they seek: to be creative and forward-thinking. Often the freeze-out lasts only until a full-blown crisis has developed, one almost beyond resolution, which could have been prevented if the professional had kept the lay leadership informed.

For the professional, the nemesis is the volunteer who wants to run the Center as he (this volunteer is almost universally male and macho) *thinks* he runs his own business. This type is very familiar. He issues orders right and left to all levels of staff, those with whom he works directly, as well as anyone else in view. He treats professionals as though they were his own employees, whom he has the right to hire, fire, and discipline. This type of volunteer is a terrible person with whom to work, but he is also trainable! Leadership development, not only for the new volunteer but also for the one who has already moved up in the ranks, is essential in building mutual trust and respect. It must continue throughout the career of each lay leader.

The next generation of volunteers will differ in several ways from today's lay leaders:

1. The new generation of volunteers will want a Center for themselves and their families. Families of board members have been using preschool and camping services for some time. In the coming years, more and more board members will be avid Center participants who will want a nonideological, nondoctrinaire approach to Jewish life. They will want to experience Jewish pluralism in an open, congenial setting called a Jewish Community Center.
2. Over time, the number of women who serve as program volunteers will decline dramatically because of the increasing proportion of Jewish women in the workforce. Most women will wait until they are retired before they take on assignments in program delivery. Those who are single heads of families, an increasing number also, will be severely limited in the time available for any volunteer activity. In fact, they are more likely to require service than to provide it.
3. In contrast to earlier generations, a high proportion of volunteer leadership will be professionals and managers, rather than entrepreneurial business types. They will have less time to devote to volunteering and to recreation. It is probable that many men and women will choose to spend time in recreational leisure-time activities, investing time grudgingly, if at all, as volunteers.
4. Future board and committee members will expect a high-tech professional staff, one with more than a nodding acquaintance with computers, word processors, and other technology. They may insist more urgently than in the past that your clerical support staff, using modern technology, be formed into an agency or departmental pool, requiring the elimination of the personal secretary! Professionals will be expected to put their own fingers to the computer keyboard or manipulate the mouse!
5. Lay leaders will expect the executive to supervise closely the fiscal officer. They will insist that the professional has enough training in financial matters to understand and monitor the financial affairs of the department or agency.

Ultimately, when all the rules and definitions are in place, the lay-professional relationship depends for its effectiveness on two people complementing each other's skills, knowledge, and personality as they play off of each other. I have worked with great numbers of professionals during my

career as a volunteer—from line workers in the Milwaukee Jewish Community Center to executives of major national and international organizations. In each relationship, the governing principles remained the same—policy making and execution. Yet, each relationship differs as each is shaped by personal characteristics of the partners in it. The role of each partner is guided by clear role definition, but the working out of the relationship is a kind of unchoreographed improvised duet. That, in fact, is one of the great pleasures of my volunteer life—in each lay-professional relationship, to find the nuances and subtleties in response that bring out the best in each of us and make our partnership fulfilling and effective.

REFERENCES

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THE MORE THINGS CHANGE: THE LAY-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

The concept of partnership between the executive and the agency board of directors is a prevailing theme in social work administration and education. It is seldom challenged. In the absence of significant research is has apparently achieved acceptance in the field more as an act of faith than as a practice principle derived from tested knowledge. Its roots go back in history and its usage is currently entrenched in the belief system of social work.

"Partnership" is often described as an equality of responsibility, sharing and commitment by the executive and the board in the traditions, values, goals, destiny, and survival of the agency. This basic relationship of an individual to an organization is neatly wrapped up in the concept of stake. In the absence of a clear definition of the respective responsibilities and authority of the professional staff and citizen leaders, some writers suggest that both have an equal stake in the operation and achievement of the agency. . . .

If there are unequal stakes in the quality performance and advancement of the agency held by the executive and the board the myth of partnership will be glaringly apparent.

The validity and myth of partnership are often in tension. The point of focus is in the position of executive.

The actual state of affairs and the true nature of relationships will appear in situations of disagreement or serious conflict. It would be quite revealing to examine the annual game of musical chairs on the executive level in agencies. Excluding vacancies due to death or retirement, the announced bases of executives' departures may be misleading either by omission or commission. One can suggest that these changes may often be due to failure by the executive to separate myth from reality.

The myth of partnership between himself and the board lies precisely in assuming an equal stake exists between the two and little or no differentiation in organizational function. Those executives who survive may represent the astute and wise ones who perceive the distinction between myth and validity and act accordingly. The price those who fail have paid and the cost to the agency and the community have yet to be determined.

"The 'Partnership' of Executive and Board—Myth or Reality" by Louis Goldstein, Ph.D., *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Fall, 1964, p. 46.