

# Essential Competencies for the Jewish Communal Professional

DAVID DUBIN

*Executive Director, Jewish Community Center on the Palisades, Tenafly, New Jersey*

*The mission of Jewish objectives . . . is inextricably related to the essential skills of professional practice. A worker with a strong Jewish commitment, but lacking in organizational and diagnostic skills is limited in what he can achieve as a practitioner even though his heart may be in the right place. A Jewishly committed caseworker is not effective if he does not have the skill to diagnose the significance of ethnicity or religious practice in either problems of self-image or familial conflict. A Jewishly committed group worker is ineffective if he does not have the skill to market and engineer an important cultural program. A Jewishly committed Federation worker is ineffective if he lacks the conceptual or communication skills to design and promote a new program of Jewish education and so on.*

**A**CHIEVEMENT of standards of professional practice in Jewish communal service is a function of the level of competence of its practitioners. Unlike the assembly line, the field of Jewish communal service stakes its mission on the creative individuality of its professionals. This paper, however, will concern itself with those essential skills which make up the competencies required in Jewish communal service to meet minimal standards of job performance. Once these essential competencies are identified, individual creativity can elevate practice from a level of acceptability to a higher plane of excellence.

In practice, workers often shift intra-agency or inter-agency from one area of specialization to another. Agency assignments often require skills that go beyond the worker's original educational concentration. Agencies are often staffed by personnel from a multitude of disciplines with job tasks not always following predictable lines. Given these realities, it would seem valuable to identify essential competencies that are portable and productive and can help workers understand job expectations and achieve successful employment. These views have been developed by the author through his experience as an

executive and employer of Jewish communal professionals. Of the many areas of skill which can be enumerated, the following can be included under the rubric of "essential."

## **Application of the Principle of Self-Determination**

There is no principle in social work theory that is more meaningful and practical than the principle of self-determination. The concept of self-determination has withstood all the changes experienced by our agencies. It is the one enduring concept that governs our purposes philosophically and our practice methodologically. It is the underlying credo that goes to the heart of the very existence of social work. It is a principle peculiarly fitting communal service as well as social work.

In Jewish communal service, this principle is often spelled out in terms of community involvement in setting communal policies and in governance of agencies. In direct practice it permeates every facet of our work and it is a universal principle that guides our practice in every setting within Jewish communal service. Faithfulness to this principle in philosophy and practice comprises

perhaps the most essential skill of the Jewish communal professional, irrespective of educational perspective. Expectations of professional staff in this area of practice are universal and degrees of skillfulness in the application of this principle are measurable. Agency goals of providing sustained well-being for the individual, enhancement of groups and leadership in the community hinge on the worker's capacity for faithfulness to the concept of self-determination and the process that feeds its realization. The circumvention of this process, for the sake of expedience or from callousness or obtrusion of subjective needs, is a liability not affordable to agencies committed to energizing human resources through professional practice.

### Self-Discipline

Maturity by definition is a relative term and its meaning changes with the developmental stages of growth. We cannot expect a beginning caseworker to have the competence of an experienced therapist, a teen worker the savvy of a center director, the Federation worker the community perspective of the executive. We also cannot expect the beginner to possess the poise and security that come from experience and positive feedback and are a necessary foundation for maturing skills. What, then, are the essential maturity levels that can realistically be expected of students entering the field?

It appears that the concept of self-awareness was given greater attention in graduate schools when there were less students in school and when there was a greater emphasis on the psychosocial orientation. Introspection and the development of the "professional self" were integral to social work education and the self-awareness mentality carried over into full-time practice. Workers

now entering the field of Jewish communal service, particularly those with a generic orientation, do not appear to have struggled enough with reconciling personal needs with the development of the professional self. Consequently, there is evidence of a lack of self-awareness and self-discipline among a disproportionate number of young people entering the field. This void often results in behavior which is counter-productive to meeting minimally acceptable standards of performance. While agency executives must be realistic in their expectations of self-mastery in young graduates, some level of self-discipline within job performance is a reasonable expectation and needs to be communicated to both schools producing the workers and the workers themselves. It is important to identify specific concerns in this area of self-discipline that, in the real job world, comprise expectations among employers against which job performances are measured. It would be helpful for schools preparing students for Jewish communal service to consider these expectations in the review of their curricula as they attempt to prepare students for successful employment. Several expectations we might name are:

*Control of Ego Needs*—Not unrelated to the essential skill in the application of the principle of self-determination is the importance of controlling that personal need fulfillment which interferes with the professional's focusing on the needs of others. Young professionals show too much evidence they circumvent process to gain personal recognition rather than enabling others to gain recognition by helping them execute for themselves. A worker's expedience in taking unilateral action, side-stepping the process of involvement of self and others not only forecloses on opportunities for self-growth within the client but indicates both a lack of faith in people and a

greater absorption with self than with others. With clients, committees, and communities, some evidence of control of such ego needs will inevitably be sought in measuring expectations against job performance.

*Sense of Self*—Too often we encounter workers who are tentative, unresponsive and clearly still entangled in their search for an identity. A term often employed today in reference communications is "spacy." It speaks to the sense of detachment that emanates from some young workers, symptomatic of unresolved familial conflicts and lack of self-understanding. It is important to both schools and agencies to attempt to distinguish between irregularities which are suspect but within the normative range for a beginning worker and will allow for professional practice and those irregularities which are excessive and will hinder professional practice.

*Post-Adolescent Maturity*—As indicated earlier, the attempt to define maturity is like leading with one's chin. Here, too, we must distinguish between behavioral levels that are deemed appropriate, based on our conceptual understanding of the stages of human growth and development, and behavior which we believe is residual in the sense that it lags behind chronological age and all the responsibilities and challenges that go with it. Symptoms of adolescent behavior in young professionals entering Jewish communal service often reflect this lag between the assumed responsibilities of age and emotional readiness for professional activity. Symptoms of heightened defensiveness, over-reaction to authority, and unbalanced emotional responses mirror adolescent remnants that obstruct professional practice and are readily detectable in evaluative processes.

One cannot instruct schools how to produce mature students nor can one expect schools to guarantee standards of

maturity. However, if the curricula of schools are designed to help prepare students for satisfactory job performance, it would appear reasonable to expect a strong focus within the curricula on the very areas of practice in which the students will engage as workers and be measured for satisfactory job performance.

### Conceptual Skills

The excitement of Jewish communal service lies in the opportunities it affords for individual creativity. The scope and quality of services in Jewish communal agencies mirror the scope and quality of the seminal activity emanating from its workers. The unique character of a given agency reflects the distinct personality of its professional staff. For this reason, the importance of developing conceptual skills is paramount. Much of the work of professional staff is and should be an orderly implementation of ideas, observations, and diagnostic insights. In short, the capacity for meaningful professional activity hinges on the worker's ability to formulate notions based on a conceptual understanding of behavior, of community and the goals of the agency. The key is the worker's ability to relate his professional activity to a targeted need, identified through observation and definition. A caseworker has no "manual" to develop a treatment approach to a given client. More often than not, his goals are based on his own diagnosis and formulation of an idea or concept that might work given his understanding of a client's needs and environmental influences. In Centers, one would hope that program activity flows from the diagnosis of social, educational or cultural needs in the formulation of an idea, or concept, that could help meet these needs through the vehicle of program. The conceptually

oriented worker selects his programs on the basis of thinking related to needs. The non-conceptually oriented worker fills brochures with activities that may be enjoyable but are selected helter skelter, without intelligent forethought. In Federations, one could easily get trapped in the routine of community processes and campaign detail. The conceptually oriented professional reflects a mentality that allows for the study of the "personality" of a given community, identifies needs and targets his input, by the formulation of an idea, or concept, and engages in a process of planning and/or campaign to confront those needs.

Too often, and perhaps understandably, workers become absorbed with the busy-ness or business of getting a job done. However, it is not difficult to differentiate between the worker who carries with him conceptual learning, articulates it and applies it in his work from the worker who surrenders the opportunity to formulate ideas based on theory, yielding to the expedience of completing tasks in the role of a functionary.

### Communication Skills

Perhaps the most widely used term today in business and the professions is "marketing." It is the concept and process of identifying human needs and providing products and services to meet those needs through effective communication, and on an economically feasible basis. For the Jewish communal professional, the key to marketing the service of his agency is communication skills. In all sectors of Jewish communal service, including the therapeutic setting, the effectiveness of the worker is significantly influenced by the force and fluency of his skills in articulation. In our profession, the formulation of ideas

is tested and refined in the process of interfacing with others. If an idea cannot be communicated effectively, to be conveyed to others or to enhance through others, then opportunities for implementation, in terms of providing products and services to meet needs will be limited. It is evident that there is the need to bolster communication skills of new workers.

Many of the new workers are bright and capable but have problems in stretching their thoughts to give them wholeness and to score points in promoting an idea. In some cases, there is almost a monosyllabic quality to their presentations and they are frustrated in not being able to reach and inspire others. There is no mystery to the fact that written presentation of conceptual material is often threatening to young workers, and it is disappointing to note the decline in publication by younger staff members.

In Jewish communal agencies, the worker is a role model and his image as a leader is determined by his abilities as a communicator. His role as an advocate for the rights and needs of others is based on skill as a communicator. His abilities to intervene as a practitioner and to influence as an educator are measured by his skills as a communicator. In today's world, it is not shameful to learn the skills of effective salesmanship while preserving our own ethical commitments. We are in the business of ideas and services and the structure of our Jewish welfare system often places us in the position of persuasive communication of concepts of service to others, be it a supervisor, committee or board. In both the schools and agencies, it would be a valuable investment of time to develop creative techniques to help our students and workers learn how to represent confidently who they are and what they have to offer through effective communication skills.

### Diagnostic Skills

Perhaps the most gaping deficiency in the preparation of the Jewish communal worker is in the area of diagnostic skills. Some in the field have called for a stronger emphasis on the psychosocial orientation in the curricula of both the traditional school of social work and the schools with the Jewish communal focus. It is particularly significant to note that, in the matter of diagnostic skills, it is difficult to distinguish levels of skill between graduates of schools of social work and schools of Jewish communal service. The responsibility for the deficiency of skill in this area must be shared by both the schools and the agencies.

The generic orientation in graduate schools with their pluralistic approach to learning does not lend itself to transmitting depth in diagnostic skills nor does it suggest that diagnostic skill is crucial in terms of the mentality of the professional. The agencies, on the other hand, do not seem to be making great demands in this area. The caseworkers seem to be more task-centered, functional and oriented to behavior modification. The group workers place great emphasis on the scope of activities and management skills. The community organization people often engage in the movement and mobilization of people towards fund campaigns through habit not examination. In a sense, the schools have been responsive to the field in this area.

The problem that remains, however, is that the standards of professional practice are compromised when we neither prepare nor supervise workers to translate their professional being into substantive work based on analytic thought processes. Ultimately, those that are introspective begin to recognize the superficiality of their input and often begin thinking of other forms of

expression to gain professional satisfaction. Further, there is always the "danger" of workers entering into an agency that employs supervisors who have not "caught up" with the times and who still underline diagnostic skills as a yardstick to measure job performance.

### Interventive Skills

The educator who teaches that errors of commission are better than errors of omission contributes to professional development. The traditional social work supervisor who requires students to commit to a plan of action before his next interview with a client or meeting with a group contributes to professional development. In both cases, the worker is being helped to train himself to risk and to have faith in the resilience of people who can survive errors of positive motivation. Intervention is born out of the skills of diagnosis, conceptualization and communication. It is a conscious and intentional act on the part of the worker to effect change based on goals established through observation and thought. The suggestion of teaching "risking" is not a new one. However, one of the consequences of workers entering the field without being steeped in an area of specialization is that there is a paradoxical increase in the risk factor in risking.

Without the security of specialization in a given competence or in being prepared for general Jewish communal service with a smattering of knowledge that seems to qualify one for a variety of Jewish agencies, the worker is less likely to have the confidence necessary to employ interventive skills purposefully and planfully. Further, in some agencies, particularly in Centers and Federations, there is the reality of producing results and the reality of measuring job performance by these results. It may appear harsh, but it is now a fact of our

existence, that the products matter as much as the process. Our ability to intervene at all levels as active agents of influence, affects both the process and the products. In the education of professionals for the field, these realities need to be brought home to alert them to the expectations they will be facing in their agencies.

### Organization Skills

Today, more than ever, given the multidimensional character of job contents and the sheer volume of work, the need to begin a job with organizational skills is crucial. Unfortunately, as agency executives will attest, it is a skill that is sorely lacking in a disproportionate number of young workers. In truth, it is not given priority in graduate education, which places greater emphasis on academic subjects. It is the one skill that is and always has been "inherited" by the agency for it to develop in the worker. To be sure, there are many workers who have native ability in organization and while it should be expected that one develops these skills on the job, there remains the reality of setting some reasonable and minimal expectations in this area even at the entry level.

A premise stated earlier is that the mission of graduate schools is to teach essential skills for effective practice and successful employment. If this premise is an acceptable one, then an examination of what gets taught in school would be in order. Executives, for example, might urge that schools consider subjects related to time management, organizational techniques, strategic planning, prioritizing job tasks, etc. It is rare that beginning workers do not, at some point, complain of feeling "overwhelmed." Here, too, in anticipation of this anxiety, it would not seem inappropriate to help students be prepared for this inevitable stress and to deal with it. The relationship between organi-

zational ability or administrative skill and the fulfillment of job requirements is a crucial one. Students need to understand this going in. Schools can help them be ready. Agencies must help them develop these skills.

### Jewish Practice Skills

We have learned that knowledge, empathy and commitment help define the meaning of being a Jewish communal professional. We now must identify "execution" as the essential skill in defining an effective Jewish communal professional. Knowledge and feelings are necessary but inadequate if they cannot be translated into service. Many workers, at all levels, have knowledge and commitment, and in some cases personal piety, but lack the other skills aforementioned and are thus ineffective in execution. The mission of Jewish objectives, therefore, is inextricably related to the essential skills of professional practice.

A worker with a strong Jewish commitment, but lacking in organizational and diagnostic skills, is limited in what he can achieve as a practitioner even though his heart may be in the right place. A Jewishly committed caseworker is not effective if he does not have the skill to diagnose the significance of ethnicity or religious practice in either problems of self-image or familial conflict. A Jewishly committed group worker is ineffective if he does not have the skills to market and engineer an important cultural program. A Jewishly committed Federation worker is ineffective if he lacks the conceptual or communication skills to design and promote a new program of Jewish education.

To the executive, a most impressive feature of any staff member, is when there is evidence in his work output that he selected a Jewish agency because he feels a sense of Jewish mission and is

able to satisfy this commitment through effective competence at implementation. The capacity for significant Jewish practice rests squarely on his or her meeting the test of the other essential skills for the Jewish communal professional.

### Summary

It should be clear that any observation made on practice skills is without meaning if there is no capacity for human relationships. This gift precedes and eclipses all others. For purposes of this presentation, the pre-eminence of this factor has been assumed.

An effort has been made to identify those skills needed to ensure minimally

acceptable standards of job performance. They are not inclusive by any means and others may enunciate other priorities. These essential skills are thought to be universal in that they are applicable to the broad field of Jewish communal service. The reality is that students today are being prepared for a profession and not for an agency. Their skills are portable and agencies have demonstrated flexibility in their criteria for engaging professional staff. This statement reflects one attempt to identify, if not dramatize, those skills that need to be addressed as employees seek job satisfaction and achievement and employers seek to establish the highest possible standards of service.

### 25 Years Ago in this Journal

... This is the probable source of the manifold excellence of the findings about Jewish family life. For myself, I cannot separate the faith of the Jew from the patterns of his home life, for the evidence would seem to indicate that where there is a diminution in the strength of the one, the strength of the other also declines.

From a dynamic point of view, too, there seems to me to be correlation between this faith and the principles and criteria which we have set up for emotional maturity. Judaism is man-fostering, not man-flagellating. It attributes to man original worth, not original sin. It approves a robust rather than a puritanical sexual life, but insists that it be characterized by fidelity and integrity. Its ethics are deed-centered, rather than creed-centered. It is healthily aggressive, in the face of evil, rather than passive or permissive and does not turn the other cheek to sadism. It insists that guilt feelings must be related to untoward behavior, rather than to violations of ecclesiastic principles. It eschews the use of fear as a deterrent or

the promise of rewards in the hereafter as a motivation, in compensation for good deeds. (Ben Azzai said "The reward of a *mitzvo* (good deed) is a *mitzvo*; and the reward of an *averah* (transgression) is an *averah*".) It favors sublimation and gratification of id-impulses, rather than blanket renunciation or repression. It is this-worldly, rather than other-worldly, progressivistic, rather than perfectionistic, centrifugal, moving constantly outward from the individual to society, from the "I" to the "Thou," rather than centripetal, concerning itself with the salvation of the individual and his soul alone. It is reality centered, rather than myth and mystery centered. It is melioristic as to the future of man rather than messianic or pessimistic. It is God-seeking, rather than God-fawning. It leans on reason rather than revelation in its questing for truth. It is universal, rather than parochial. It is democratic, rather than sacerdotal, and it is dynamic, rather than static.

Abraham W. Franzblau, M.D.  
Fall, 1958