

CREATING CHANGE IN THE FEDERATION SYSTEM

By Shifra Bronznick

One year ago, Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, in partnership with United Jewish Communities, launched a comprehensive research-and-action project aimed at closing the leadership gap at the highest echelons of Federations.

The paucity of women's leadership is a reality throughout the Federation system. There are no women leading the largest 19 federations, and only three out of 20 large intermediate federations currently have a woman at the helm.

Research Is the First Step In The Change Process

The project began with a research initiative which sent a team into the field to interview Federation CEOs, high potential women professionals, and volunteer leaders in 13 communities. Our research team – Steven M. Cohen, Shifra Bronznick, Sherry Israel, Shaul Kelner and Didi Goldenhar, represented a mix of leading sociologists and practitioners in organizational change initiatives.

The resulting report “Creating Gender Equity and Organizational Effectiveness in Jewish Federations,” released in February 2004, offers a vivid picture of the conditions that constrain professional opportunities for women in the Federation system. Anchored by a common set of understandings, we are now ready to generate a new communal conversation about the policies, practices and programs that can create and sustain systemic change. Our goal is to stimulate people to shift their mindset, test alternative perspectives and practice the kind of new behaviors that will create genuine gender equity.

Leaky Pipelines in Leadership

What causes the “leaky pipeline” for women's leadership? Our research identified a cluster of key obstacles that impede women's progress in federations.

- “The old boys’ club” is a firmly embedded feature of Federation life, affecting the career trajectory for women at every stage, from professional development and salaries to promotions and search processes. The old boys club is just one artifact of a contradictory organizational culture in which male executives and lay leaders frequently reveal gender bias in their attitudes while simultaneously affirming their belief in the meritocracy of the federation system.
- Perceptions about leadership and leadership style serve to exclude women professionals from the Federation hierarchy. On the one hand, many male professional and lay leaders question whether women can be tough enough to

execute the myriad responsibilities of a Federation CEO. On the other hand, an aggressive style is often perceived as a positive attribute in men and a negative characteristic in women.

- The capacity of women to solicit major annual gifts—a key consideration for higher level executive positions – was questioned by some male professional and lay leaders despite the growing numbers of women in senior fundraising posts and rising trends in women’s philanthropy.
- The “24/6” lifestyle demanded of Federation CEOs is daunting to many young people, both men and women, but the relentless schedules place women at a greater disadvantage. The lack of institutional support for workplace flexibility makes it more likely that women’s advancement to leadership positions will be permanently derailed as the result of even a temporary hiatus.
- Professional development is weak throughout the Federation system. In this area, women can be seen as the “canary in the mines,” signaling the urgent need for quality supervision, effective mentoring and networking. While both men and women suffer from the lack of systematic professional development, women are affected disproportionately since the network for recruitment and referral for high-level positions is largely male. Women are often excluded from business related gatherings where informal mentoring and networking takes place and have fewer opportunities to showcase their skills and broaden their expertise.

Changing the System: Practical Interventions and Sustained Collaboration

To analyze the findings, our research team consulted with three of the leading experts in gender equity initiatives – Professors Lotte Bailyn, Joyce Fletcher and Virginia Valian. Together, we concluded that long-term change will require a multi-dimensional strategy championed by the leadership and sustained by the collaboration of stakeholders throughout the system. We acknowledged that, as tempting as it might be simply to replicate successful change initiatives in academia, corporations or even foundations, we need to develop a program for change that learns from breakthroughs in other fields, but reflects the authentic values and specific needs of our own culture.

Change grafted onto an existing system often withers quickly while homegrown change tends to root more deeply over time. The following interventions are quite promising because they emerged directly from the interviews and from subsequent discussions with Federation executives and lay leaders:

- Launching new programs to identify, cultivate and leverage women’s leadership;
- Increasing participation of women in every venue, from United Jewish Communities’ new Mandel Executive Development program to the top speakers’ lists for the General Assembly;

- Collaborating on cross-organizational efforts to improve volunteer search processes and develop creative approaches to recruitment and relocation issues;
- Experimenting with local Federations on new models for organizational design and workplace flexibility, to help everyone work smarter, not just harder.

Making Change Happen: What We Know

The AWP-UJC project flows directly from the work we have been doing with Ma'yan, to make visible the numbers of women who are in national leadership. Just as Ma'yan's report, *Power and Parity*, stimulated a new conversation about women's lay leadership in 1997, we expect to use the AWP-UJC report as the leverage for another round of engagement with organizational leaders about women's advancement.

While we are determined to bring women into top leadership in the Federation system, we know that the project will encounter resistance and cultural clashes. The changes we propose will not happen quickly. UJC's public partnership with AWP is encouraging, as it demonstrates the leadership's willingness to be experimental and transparent, with both our failures and successes taking place in full view.

At the same time, we are attempting to influence a consensus-driven culture which traditionally has turned its focus on external crises while steadfastly ignoring the weaknesses of its internal affairs. The boosterism of the federation system is driven by the fear of alienating major donors. This orientation towards painting a positive, blemish-free portrait has the potential to undermine our project's best intentions, which is to shed light on the problems as the first step in a sequenced program of creative improvement and innovation.

We must be mindful of the underside of Federation's "can-do" campaign culture. Since the release of our report, many leaders have said, "Give us the action plan." But how often are pre-packaged recommendations taken to heart and rolled out with conviction? While our report offers strategies for developing practical recommendations, we have resisted presenting formulas and timelines. To have real impact, our public experiments must be designed with the full participation of our UJC partners, customized to the conditions at the national and local level.

Making Change Happen: What We Can Do

This initiative offers us an important opportunity to take an imaginative leap forward and bridge the gap that so often exists between *knowing* and *doing*. It is up to all of us to hold the Federation world accountable for progress. Here are seven simple ways you can play a real part in closing the leadership gap in the Jewish world.

- 1) Contribute some portion of your philanthropy as a lever to drive the effort for gender equity.
- 2) Encourage your local federation to hold meetings to discuss our report with the Board.
- 3) Write to Steven Hoffman at UJC and affirm the importance of this initiative. Ask UJC to keep you informed of the project's progress, especially the plans to increase women's participation in the new Mandel Executive Development Program
- 4) If your federation has a high-level opening, ask for information about the search process. Who is on the committee? Who is handling recruitment? Will relocation packages be made available for the right candidate? What strategy will be employed to recruit a sufficient number of women?
- 5) Approach the Jewish agencies that you support, to review their policies on flexibility, childcare and maternal leave. Let us know which agency executives should be informed about our ongoing fieldwork on flexibility in the workplace.
- 6) Become an informal "talent scout" for AWP. Send us the names of high-level and promising women professionals who should be cultivated and showcased.
- 7) Finally, *speak up*, *speak out*, and *speak to us* -- when you see real life examples of gender bias in your workplace, and especially, when and where you see any evidence of change in the making.