

## EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE

### An Examination of the Field of Jewish Communal Service from the Standpoint of the Professional

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For forty years, I have been associated with fields of study and work that seem to have been in constant search of validation. In my undergraduate days, I was a political science major, and I can still recall the discussion in our introductory course in which the text built the case for viewing the field as a "science." Really? The desire to be associated with something "hard" as opposed to "soft" seemed to have dogged my colleagues during my days in academia.

The field of Jewish communal service, in which I have served as a professional for 33 years, has had a similar inferiority complex. In recent years many have sought justification from the world of business administration, at times seemingly rejecting our human service roots.

Our mandate to meet human needs from a Jewish and a communal perspective certainly can be enhanced if our organizations are well run and efficient. A solid business model that is based on meaningful fiduciary oversight and accountability is a valuable addition to a field that years ago assumed such accountability was neither necessary, appropriate, nor possible. So, how far can this model carry us in our quest for excellence?

In 1982, *In Search of Excellence* was written just as I was completing my first year as the CEO of the United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh (Thomas J. Peters & Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1982). Over the next two decades, multitudes of tracts on management style and culture have been published. We have been exposed to their mantras, all telling us the easy way to get the job done in a superior fashion. In a

country obsessed by quick painless results, this should have come as no surprise.

The fundamental difference between the corporate sector and the field of Jewish communal organizations is simple. In the business world, profit-driven goals and objectives result in a bottom-line orientation. The product or service offered by these entities is generally offered by competitors as well, if not today, then tomorrow or next year for sure. One buys the product based on some balance of price, value, reliability, and service.

Our collective mission of securing the survival of the Jewish people is unique. There may be differences of opinion within our field as to how to best achieve that objective, whether through synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, day schools, Jewish federations, or Jewish health and human service agencies, but there is no doubt that as a collectivity, our primary motivation is to achieve Jewish continuity, a mission that has existed for thousands of years. We must never forget this distinction. It is not only fundamental to what we do but it is also inherent in who we are.

We have a sacred duty to perform. The Mishna (Avot 2:2) quotes Rabban Gamaliel, son of R. Judah the Patriarch, as saying: "All who labor for the community should labor with them for Heaven's sake, for then the merit of the community's forebears will sustain them, and their beneficence will endure forever. And as for you [who labor thus], I regard you as deserving great reward, as though you had accomplished it all [on your own]." That sure makes for a pretty lofty job description.

Before we examine what excellence in practice means within the context of the Jewish mandate, it is worthwhile to see what we can learn from the search for operational

excellence. Because there is a value in delivering services as cost effectively as possible, raising significant resources to meet our needs, and planning strategically to be responsive to future requirements, we can benefit from the following eight attributes Peters and Waterman gleaned from their study of the best-run companies in America (the parenthetical comments are my own):

1. *A bias for action* (outcome orientation as opposed to endless process and decision making)
2. *Being close to the customer* (learning from the people we serve)
3. *Autonomy and entrepreneurship* (empowering the team)
4. *Productivity through people* (respecting the team)
5. *Hands-on and value driven* (what we stand for)
6. *Stick to the knitting* (don't stray from the mission)
7. *Simple form and lean staff* (function is more important than structure)
8. *Simultaneous loose-tight properties* (you can't win only throwing fast balls)

How can we benefit from these eight attributes of business success, and do Jewish communal organizations have anything meaningful to contribute to a wider understanding of how human beings can perform better in an organizational environment?

We definitely have a proclivity for endless process. Who hasn't worked in the Jewish organizational world and encountered the endless opinions and second guessing? The "stiffed-neckedness" of our people brought us across the Sea of Reeds, only to appear at times to have bogged us down in the wilderness of inaction. But with process comes consensus building and buy-in. We can serve as a good example of what can be achieved when people are truly committed to a cause.

We can learn from the people we serve. To do so we need to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services. We must ask our clients, members, and contributors for input. If we do evaluate, we must then use those results

to adjust priorities and upgrade quality. We should certainly stand as a model for encouraging feedback. When have Jews failed to say what they think, even if they are not asked?

Empowerment of any team is vital. Many of us still believe in top/down authoritarian models, even though we live in a world in which the USSR has collapsed. We need to cede some autonomy to others. We Jews are a participatory people; our genetic makeup craves such encouragement.

What better way to motivate others than to recognize what they do and to treat them with respect? Where can one find a better model for the sanctity of the individual than our Jewish tradition? "What is hateful unto you, you should not do unto your neighbor" was not written by Peters and Waterman; it was uttered by Hillel in the first century B.C.E.

*In Search of Excellence*, admonishes us, "Figure out your value system. Decide what your company stands for." Does anyone know more about what they stand for than we do? Our value system was delivered to Moshe at Sinai and the world was changed forever.

Ours is a field that needs to be driven by a non-profit model and a voluntary orientation. Although we can learn from the private sector, we must not focus our attention solely in that direction. If it is true that any workforce needs to be highly motivated, well-trained, managed properly, evaluated meticulously, and continually repositioned, it is also time that each of us needs to have a higher goal toward which to strive. We need to have meaning in our lives. And our field gives those who work in our environment the possibility of forging a link between these dual objectives.

Although our field has a unique mission, living in the 21st century ensures that our constituency is not guaranteed to respond to that mission. They have other choices for involvement. We need to educate them Jewishly, if we wish to attract them. Simultaneously, the fundamental aspect of who we are must permeate everything that we do. We are Jewish community organizations, and therefore we need to act according to those values and ethics that formed the Jewish peo-

ple thousands of years ago and have sustained us through centuries of trial and tribulation. If we do so, our communities will respond.

As professionals, we come from countless fields of service and academic training, but we have one common objective: building a stronger and more vibrant Jewish community. We must participate in that community and exhibit the behavior patterns that are demanded of the Jewish people. We must strive to be Jewishly knowledgeable. And even if we are highly informed in this arena, just knowing about these values and concepts is not enough. We need to try to reflect them in our daily lives, in the work that we do within our organizations, and in the relationships that we establish with staff and volunteers alike. Yes, we need to make hard business decisions. Yes, we should operate in a disciplined and focused manner. And, even more important, we need to treat others as we would have them treat us. That is not a matter of choice, but a matter of obligation from a Jewish perspective. Hillel told us that before modern business schools existed.

Excellence in practice in the Jewish world also means openness. We need to run our organizations in a transparent manner. Except for some limited information about evaluation of personnel and other appropriately confidential matters, there needs to be full disclosure within the Jewish community. We should operate with such a model in mind because it is the right thing to do. If we wish others to join with us in a journey that will ensure the strength and vitality of our people in the future, then we need to engender a sense of trust in them. Those who work for us as staff or volunteers have to feel that they will be treated with respect and dignity. They must believe that we do not own the entire outcome any more than they do, that the deliberative process that we have a responsibility to facilitate is not meant to be the sole possession of one or a few individuals.

It is also our responsibility to set a standard for ourselves no lower than the standard that we ask others to consider adopting. Promoting the notion of effective evaluation of

ourselves will lead to effective evaluation of others as well.

In the business world, the primary objective is to make a profit by selling a product or a service. Our product or service is community building. What that means and how it is to be addressed might be answered in different ways by different members of the Jewish community. There is no doubt that, in promoting community building, we are constrained in ways which the corporate world is not. However, rising to a higher standard should never be viewed as a hardship. It should be viewed as the very element that distinguishes us from the crowd.

Although excellence in practice in the Jewish communal world may differ dramatically from the bottom-line nature of business organizations, it is true that in the end, performance is what will drive results for both of us. Excellence cannot be achieved if follow-through is not a given. The best-laid plans will have no way of affecting outcomes if they are not implemented. If the opinions of individuals are heard but those individuals never see any way in which their input was utilized, they will not stay connected. If we establish all of the best practices professionally within our organizations and then fail to make a difference, it will become apparent that there is no validity to what we do.

We should feel a sacred duty to continue the work of our ancestors. For thousands of years the Jewish community moved forward based on an understanding of the values and ethics that we represent. Our lives were driven by daily actions mandated by these values and ethics. Today, the 613 mitzvot to which we strive to adhere provide direction for all aspects of our lives. To achieve excellence in practice we must truly open ourselves to these requirements. We must live our professional lives as if we truly believe in them. We must act as if we are directed by them. If we do, then we may yet achieve excellence in our day-to-day work, which in the end will be measured not only by the bottom line but also by whether or not there will be a Jewish community for decades to come.

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