

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION Imperatives for the Field of Jewish Communal Service

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Ms. Felix Frankfurter used to tell a story about the speaking style of her husband, the late Supreme Court justice. She would say that he had two major flaws as a public speaker. The first was that he invariably wandered from the subject. The second was that he always returned to it.

I fear that this will be characteristic of my presentation. There is much to be considered with respect to recruitment and retention, and even more regarding the larger issues of professional culture that constitute the landscape we need to traverse to do them justice. I will do my best to be direct and to the point, though it will be all too tempting to wander in and out of the subject at hand.

The Wexner Foundation has staked much of its identity, and certainly considerable financial resources, upon the noble goals of enhancing, empowering, and promoting Jewish professional leadership. We have learned lessons along the way.

In 1984 Leslie Wexner developed a set of philanthropic ideas, then translated them into reality. His business was structured around a belief in doing highly focused, exceptional work. His methodology was the "specialty store" as opposed to the "department store." He did not wish to be all things to all people as

a retailer, but rather to find compelling niches and mine them with disciplined focus and an appetite for excellence. He even named his business "The Limited."

The Wexner philanthropies, reflecting this philosophy, emerged with a clear and highly defined focus: "Jewish leadership." Think about it—there are not many philanthropic foundations that could define their focus, their mission, in two words. We are such a foundation.

The focus on leadership translated into the creation of three large-scale leadership initiatives, all seeking the best and brightest individuals, and forging them into leadership communities and cultures, to tackle the emergent challenges of the Jewish people. One initiative, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, focuses upon volunteer leaders. To date, twelve hundred individuals from three-dozen North American communities have participated in the program.

The Wexner Israel Fellowship Program, co-sponsored by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, annually brings ten mid-career Israeli public officials to Harvard for a yearlong MPA program, and for extensive leadership development. One hundred and thirty Israeli officials have participated thus far, and as an alumni community they have emerged as a powerful new force in Israeli life.

The Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program identifies, supports, and trains outstanding graduate students preparing for careers in the rabbinate, cantorate, Jewish education, Jewish communal service, and Jewish studies for the North American Jewish community. To

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date, two hundred and fifty individuals have participated in this program. It is our experience with the Wexner fellowship program—on matters of recruitment, training, mentoring, placement, career tracking, and so forth—that constitutes much of what we in the Foundation have learned about the state of Jewish professional life in North America, its challenges and possibilities.

The research needed to better understand the dynamics of professional recruitment and retention is, by and large, lacking. Its absence is itself indicative of either a lack of concern, or a culture of denial around issues of professional development.

The Foundation was aware that in undertaking sustained efforts to improve the quality of Jewish professionals, it would be moving into relatively uncharted waters. As we launched our programs over fifteen years ago, we began a learning process about the professional fields we hoped to enhance, and about the people who enter and pursue careers in these fields.

A few years ago, the Foundation commissioned an important research project endeavoring to understand both the challenges of recruitment, and the unique experiences reported by junior professionals in the community as relates to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and issues of retention. The project's researchers, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Steven M. Cohen, Charles Liebman, and Jonathan Sarna, in tandem with Brandeis's Cohen Center, produced a volume entitled "Expectations, Education and Experience of Jewish Professional Leaders: Report of The Wexner Foundation Research Project on Contemporary Jewish Professional Leadership." I will draw from various aspects of this report to illustrate a number of points.

Let me state first that I do not feel altogether comfortable trying to define the challenges of recruitment and retention, and then proposing remedies or prescriptions. These are not isolated technical problems, and the solutions are not technical or simply programmatic either. These challenges cannot be addressed or "fixed" by a set of interventions or committees

alone. Rather, they are adaptive or more deeply rooted challenges. To discuss recruitment and retention in isolation from the larger systems and professional cultures that encompass them would be incomplete and would not honor the seriousness the subject deserves. But permit me to spend a few moments stating what I take to be "the basics," which are commonly known in either a studied or experienced manner about recruitment and retention. I will conclude by addressing a few larger issues drawn from the professional cultures in which we live, and the singular role those of us who presume to lead these professions have in moving these issues forward.

In discussing the current state of recruitment, I can be brief because, in all candor, we basically do not recruit, at least not in a serious, systemic manner that shows that we mean it. Admittedly, there are isolated, meaningful exceptions—Hillel has the best track record on this score—but by and large, lip service aside, we do not really recruit.

To project and perpetuate a profession requires a set of highly orchestrated efforts, emanating from a clear and compelling set of definitions and roles, and tied to predictable and convincing rewards and advancements—all presented to prospective candidates at multiple contact points and by dynamic leaders of the field. We need to learn how to do this, and I assure you that many other professions and institutions have long mastered this art, which remains elusive to us. We need to determine who should organize these efforts, on behalf of whom, where, when, and most profoundly, how.

Experiences and research at the Foundation create a compelling case that the college years appear to be the most critical time for deciding upon a professional career in Jewish communal leadership. Our study found that of the 280 Jewish communal professionals who were interviewed, more than two-thirds said that it was during college that they made their critical career choice. Moreover, on the American campus, the Jewish community has one of the most vibrant institutions in all of American campus life—Hillel (bolstered by scores of

Jewish Studies departments). We are therefore armed, ready, and poised with a whole structure in place and waiting. But we've remained in a state of "not yet." We have not yet arrived.

Our research also tells us that the vast majority of potential recruits for our fields come from twelve to fifteen campuses, which are unique by virtue of their locations, Jewish populations, and Jewish vibrancy. Let us speculate for a moment or two. There are birthright Israel returnees, waiting for our call. There are Jewish summer camp counselors and junior year in Israel participants, and Pardes Institute returnees. The list can easily be lengthened. However, the Jewish community is not systematically calling on these potential recruits.

We are not calling upon these potential recruits because of our lack of conviction that it is important to do so. Recruitment, for most communities and agencies, has become *an exercise in crisis intervention, and not an investment portfolio*. The second reason we are not calling upon young people to join us in these careers is that we are not sure what to say, how to say it, and who should be doing the talking.

Professor Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis University authored the "retention" aspects of the research we commissioned. Her work was illuminating not only because she studied issues of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction on the part of Jewish communal professionals in the first stages of their careers, but also because she studied a number of professionals who actually trained for, entered, and ultimately left the field. The report in brief, reveals that many young Jewish professionals often find themselves coping with low and uncompetitive salaries, a sense of unlimited and often unprofessional expectations, blurred boundaries that would otherwise safeguard time and privacy, an organizational context that, contrary to Jewish values, is often NOT family-friendly, difficult political maneuvering rather than a feeling of cooperation and collaboration, lack of status, little time and attention from supervisors, low availabil-

ity of mentors, few opportunities for professional growth and nourishment, and minimal Jewish knowledge and commitment on the part of most client groups, and sometimes on the part of colleagues as well. In addition, *the inability of our fields to honor, empower, and promote women remains a profoundly disturbing and singularly critical challenge as we look to the coming years.*

In fairness, many young Jewish community professionals take great joy in their callings, are fairly paid, reasonably well-supervised, and operate within some professional network from which they derive empathy, strength, and respect. But too many feel undervalued. This, coupled with the sheer lack of professionals in the wings poised to assume top positions, is alarming and must be taken seriously. We have a crisis-oriented view of professional placement. We struggle to solve immediate personnel problems, and then ignore these matters until the next crises arrive. *While it is understandable that our organizations have focused upon the search for senior professional leadership, to do so at the expense of a strong investment in junior professionals will prove to be counterproductive in the longer run.*

The pattern of feeling undervalued and isolated that we see in many junior professionals clearly indicates that we have not yet succeeded in building the kind of support systems—with appropriate rewards, mentoring, and avenues for advancement—that will assure longer-term professional development and productivity. Indeed, it would seem that networking, and the development of professional support programs at every stage of career development, emerges as the single most important technique for enhancing career satisfaction and retention. *Where are the professional sanctuaries, those special times and places where we go to learn, to heal, for empathy and support, for inside humor and to dream new dreams? How can we live without them? How can we build community for others, and not built it for ourselves?*

These thoughts lead to a set of conclusions, or the "adaptive challenges," which are

larger than the definitions and strategies we might develop if we understood recruitment and retention only in a technical, narrow sense.

We live in a Jewish community in which power resides locally. Yet there are certain challenges and certain problems that can only be addressed nationally. I submit that professional recruitment, training, support networks, career placement ladders, and standards in credentials and for professional advancement are all issues requiring a continental approach. There has been substantial skepticism in our community as to the role of national organizations, their value, and their potential. But let us be clear. The fate of these professions ultimately rests in the health and vitality of these very national institutions, their capacity to provide leadership and generate funding for the tasks of developing these careers. By national agencies, I refer to training institutions, national umbrella organizations, national professional associations, foundations operating on the national level, relevant consulting resources, and so forth. In highlighting the primary role of national systems in developing the Jewish communal professions, it is not my intention to downplay critical local activities where they occur (e.g. mentoring programs, recruitment initiatives, agency internships, professional development projects, etc.). However, given the continental scope of professional training, and the sheer mobility of career development in Jewish life, anything less than a continental approach to profession building will fail to seriously address the systemic challenges we face.

Furthermore, we are a community whose structure makes us competitive for scarce resources. We are divided into dozens of fundamentally non-collaborative pieces, both locally and nationally: federations, Hillels, synagogues, centers, day schools, camps, and so forth, all seeking the highest loyalty and productivity from a finite number of donors and from scarce resources. One of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship goals is to counter-socialize and empower a new generation of professionals to create a professional and communal culture of collaboration rather than one of

competition. Just as these issues can only be addressed through a national approach, they can also only be addressed meaningfully if we are prepared to collaborate across fields and institutional frameworks, rather than to compete or fend for ourselves. Should Federation recruiters help guide people into the rabbinate? Should Center recruiters promote Hillel also? Should Hillel recruiters try to identify and encourage the next generation of Federation executives? *If the answer to these questions is not a resounding "Yes," then we will continue to stumble for lack of vision.*

We must stop playing divide-and-conquer on these and other issues. In the final analysis, we need to enlist a cadre of very visible and strong local professional leaders to champion the larger cause. We need to find a group with that courage, and with that vision. We need a cadre of professional leaders who, in addition to all of their other demanding responsibilities, will also stake their integrity on building these professions—senior leaders and younger leaders alike. Here I mean not a committee that meets a couple of times a year, but a group of driven pioneers who will not sleep well until this is done. Like all meaningful change, this will take a long time, and will require patience as well as determination.

A final and larger premise is that building these professions is *our work* and not the work of volunteers. To be sure, volunteers must be our partners in moving these professions forward. They are needed. But this is not their cause to lead. Volunteers are sometimes mistakenly blamed for our lack of professional empowerment, status, or compensation, but I believe emphatically that this blame is misplaced.

The culture surrounding volunteer/professional relations is often volatile and generally normless. It has a fair amount of ambiguity, even dysfunctionality (which by no means is unrelated to the matter at hand). But my sense is that most volunteers will indeed respect the imperatives of profession building once strong professional leaders who care deeply about them articulate these imperatives in a compelling way. It is perhaps painful to admit, but

rather than blaming external barriers, the lack of profession building we have experienced may relate more to our own lack of professional self-esteem, to our own unfortunate tendency to treat issues like recruitment and retention as local, idiosyncratic, and secondary. In this sense, fundamentally, we have been both perpetrator and victim.

We have much to learn about recruitment and retention: from other professions and fields; about appropriate and relevant training options for our fields; about developing professional support networks, meaningful compensation and benefits standards; about issues of mobility and advancement across agency and community lines; about how Jewish organizations, consulting firms, and foundations can relate to each other as partners in these processes. As with all human and organizational challenges, we need to develop a will to embark upon this journey, and we need tenacious leaders to lead us through it, and to assure its success.

This will all be something of a new frontier. We will need to go to places we have not yet been, and convince professional colleagues and committed volunteers alike that the fate of our community rests in our success in building these professions. We will need staunch local leaders to act nationally, and to scale the non-collaborative cultures that separate our institutions and sectors. This is truly the work of *chalutzim*, of pioneers.

I am reminded of a conversation with my colleague, Rabbi Elka Abrahamson, about the Torah portion "Shelach Lecha," from BaMidbar,

when Moshe was told to "send men to scout the land of Canaan...one from each of the ancestral tribes...each one a chieftain among them." The command to go and scout this new and unimaginable land begs interpretation, for the verb that is used, "*allu zeh*," means to go up or to elevate oneself. The command to literally elevate oneself implies that the scouts were sent not only to survey and assess the next frontier, but also to be elevated by the experience, to be transformed by it.

It takes remarkable courage to venture into an unknown future, and to see it as a place of elevation and transformation rather than as a place of intimidation and fear. But this is the essence of leadership.

The scouts in the *parasha* did not fare well. Ten of the twelve returned, depressed and weeping. They went to the land, but they were not elevated by the experience. They belittled themselves and literally said, "We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers." The ten pessimists saw themselves as small bugs. The text is perhaps teaching us that good leaders see the possible in all journeys, see the capacity for elevation and transformation in the unknown, at the next frontier, and are able to see over the heads of the obstacles.

May our legacy to the next generation of professional leaders be that we took important steps forward in building these professions—that we took the challenges seriously and that we took ourselves seriously—and may we be transformed by these new efforts, just as we have been elevated by the supreme gift of devoting our lives to the Jewish people.