INFORMING CHANGE

Strategies for Professional Development:

Lessons from BBYO's Professional Development Institute

JULY 2015

INTRODUCTION

How to strategically provide professional development opportunities is an ongoing conversation in the nonprofit world. Limited time and resources and the pressing needs of critical community issues can easily get in the way of making long-term investments in developing talent. At the same time, foregoing professional development can undermine the ability of organizations to do exactly what it is that they are trying to achieve: provide high quality programs and services to meet their missions.

> BBYO is the largest pluralistic Jewish teen movement in North America offering safe and welcoming opportunities for learning and growth to all Jewish teens. BBYO encourages Jewish teens to find meaning in Judaism and to develop their Jewish identities.

In response to these challenges, BBYO—the largest Jewish teen youth organization in North America—embarked upon an ambitious program called the Professional Development Institute (PDI) to increase the capacity and commitment of talented, Jewish professionals to build careers in the Jewish community. As a large nonprofit with broad geographic reach, and having grown from reaching 26,000 teens in 2008 to over 40,000 teens in 2013, BBYO faced the challenge of providing professional development opportunities to its employees. In the longer term, it was expected that these professionals would grow their careers within BBYO or other Jewish organizations, thereby expanding the number of highly qualified professionals working in the Jewish sector overall.

The Professional Development Institute

PDI's multi-component program combined an academic track and full-time employment with a suite of other professional supports (Exhibit 1). During the three-year program, alumni earned both an MBA and a Certificate in Informal Jewish Education while working for BBYO.[1] To make the program accessible to BBYO professionals working across the nation, the model employed a mix of online learning and in-person retreats. After completing PDI academic requirements, alumni were also required to work in the Jewish community for an additional two years. The Jim Joseph Foundation underwrote the program with a generous grant of $7.5 million over seven years.

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[1] The term alumni is used to refer to all participants across all three cohorts.

Exhibit 1
PDI Program Elements & Professional Supports

Employment: Full-time employment for three years at BBYO while fulfilling PDI academic requirements.

MBA: An MBA with a focus in nonprofit management from the Kelley School of Business (Kelley) at Indiana University via their online program.

Jewish education: A Certificate in Informal Jewish Education from Hebrew College, with the option of candidacy for a master's degree at the discretion and cost of each participant.

Cohort: A cohort of participants experiencing PDI at the same time.

Mentor: A mentor in the Jewish communal sector to help reinforce the relevance of PDI for participants in their current jobs and, longer term, in their careers. At a minimum, each mentor/mentee pair was expected to meet in person for four hours each quarter.

Career support: ChangeCraft (formerly Center for Leadership Initiatives) provided one-on-one coaching, webinars and in-person seminars to help PDI participants articulate and reach their career goals.

In-person retreats & seminars: Each cohort met in person in the winter and summer for up to one week for an "in-residence" program.
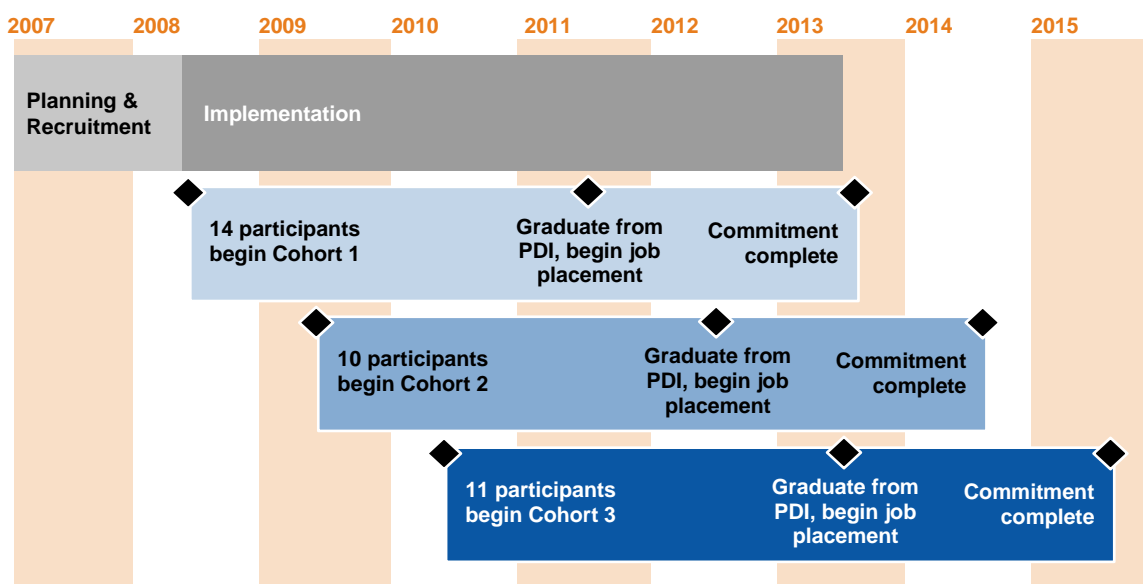
Israel trip: Hebrew College led each cohort, between its second and third program years, on a group trip to Israel, focusing on experiential learning and cohort bonding.

Commitment to working in the Jewish community: After completing the three-year program, alumni were required to commit to working in the Jewish community for two additional years, either within BBYO or at another Jewish organization.

Three cohorts of professionals attended PDI and fulfilled their commitment requirement from 2008 through 2015. BBYO invited their employees to apply to the first cohort of the three-year PDI program, which began in 2008 (Exhibit 2). In the two subsequent cohorts, BBYO opened its recruiting pool to other early and mid-career Jewish professionals (whether or not they were working at BBYO during their PDI application process). In total, 35 people were selected for the program, and almost all (94%) graduated. Overall, PDI helped train and advance the careers of this group of early- to mid-level Jewish professionals, building critical knowledge, skills and confidence and enhancing their connection to the community.

Exhibit 2
PDI Timeline

| 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |

Planning & Recruitment

Implementation

14 participants begin Cohort 1
Graduate from PDI, begin job placement
Commitment complete

10 participants begin Cohort 2
Graduate from PDI, begin job placement
Commitment complete

11 participants begin Cohort 3
Graduate from PDI, begin job placement
Commitment complete

About this Report

Since the inception of PDI, Informing Change worked closely with the Jim Joseph Foundation and BBYO to assess the program and support ongoing learning. To inform the evaluation, Informing Change conducted over 350 interviews and a handful of focus groups with a variety of stakeholders between 2008 and 2014. Evaluation findings rely most heavily on data collected from PDI alumni, their mentors and supervisors.[2] For further detail about PDI program outcomes, evaluation methods and evaluation findings, please see the executive summary: *Cultivating Jewish Professionals: Cumulative Evaluation Findings from BBYO's Professional Development Institute.*

The learnings shared in this document are based on themes that Informing Change identified from the evaluation as well as our experience evaluating other professional development programs. We also recognize that many of these learnings confirm or build upon best practices in professional development.

This brief is intended for providers of professional development opportunities and programs, including program providers, designers and funders. We offer these lessons learned to consider when embarking on professional development endeavors.

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[2] Each year, Informing Change conducted individual telephone interviews with each PDI alum, and either their mentor, a colleague or supervisor. Additional data collection includes focus groups with PDI alumni, supervisors or colleagues, BBYO staff not involved with PDI, and BBYO management; online surveys of PDI alumni and teens on regional boards staffed by Cohort 1 alumni; observation of PDI events; and materials review.

Program Model & Planning

The PDI model comprised many elements and opportunities for alumni. Based on the individual strengths of these components along with the alumni's experience with them collectively, we offer the following considerations and lessons about selecting program elements for professional development programs and experiences.

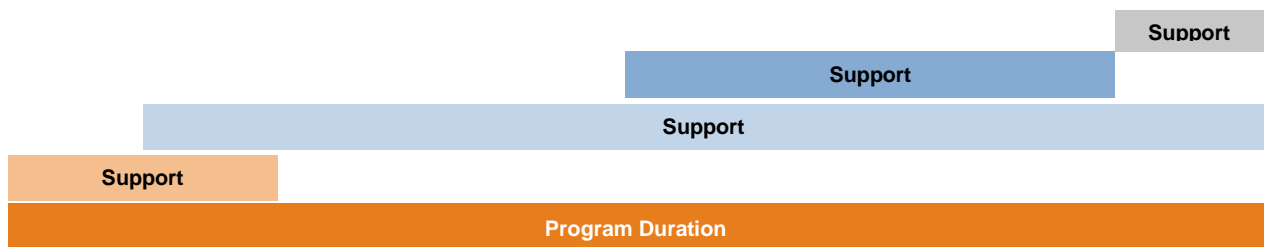### 1. Design the curriculum and content to meet the unique needs of the field.

To develop leaders and professionals in a specific field, their training, education and development should be customized to address particular needs of the sector along with the specific roles and responsibilities of managers and leaders. PDI carefully chose two academic paths: an MBA to build hard skills not included in other graduate programs—management skills and business acumen—and a certificate program from Hebrew College to ground alumni's knowledge in Jewish informal education. Ultimately, the combination of these degrees was intended to improve the service and quality of teen programming while simultaneously developing a highly skilled and talented management tier for BBYO specifically, and in time, the broader sector.

On the one hand, the MBA curriculum gave PDI alumni a broad skill set and credentials that have utility within or outside of the Jewish community. On the other hand, the PDI alumni were challenged to see the relevance of some of their education to the Jewish communal sector where they worked. Providing opportunities to tailor a curriculum to a particular sector or supporting participants in making connections between a generalist degree and the specific needs of a sector could help bridge this gap.

2. Sequence professional development supports carefully to maximize impact.

The sequence and timing of supports can be just as important as the supports themselves. PDI was designed to strategically develop well-rounded future leaders, however, alumni could not always completely absorb the available information and learning due to overlapping timelines, on top of full-time work obligations Too much new information all at once can lead people to feel overwhelmed, limiting their ability to effectively absorb the new knowledge and apply new skills in real-time. Staggering supports, especially those with major deadlines, can allow participants adequate time and space to access and make the most of the opportunities.

Support

Support

Support

Support

Program Duration

3. Find opportunities for participants to apply program learnings in their day-to-day work.

Professionals need practice to effectively absorb new knowledge and refine their skills. PDI's full-time employment track gave alumni opportunities to put program learnings into practice on the job, although the type of position they held influenced their ability to apply specific program learnings.

Supervisors and managers can help identify opportunities for participants to try out and implement new learnings. Embedding practice opportunities within program curricula, such as including a capstone-style project as in the PDI MBA curriculum, has the dual advantage of enabling participants to put theory into practice while simultaneously benefiting the organization. It is also important to recognize that some learning may be not be immediately applicable, but rather will help prepare participants for future career growth.
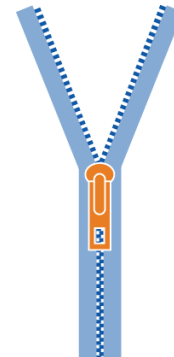
4. Individualized supports go a long way.

Having opportunities for customized professional development to address individual participants' needs in addition to those addressed in the formal program accounts for participants' different learning styles and allows for deeper focus and reflection. In PDI, alumni were matched with a mentor—a tenured professional—based on shared interests, goals or experience, and many found this relationship to be a highlight of the program. They also received individual career coaching toward the end of the program to help chart their career path. In addition, assessments that gauge participants' current capabilities, learning goals and career aspirations can help facilitate participants' self-discovery and further learning.

5. Align learning platforms with program goal.

With the rise of online learning, there are now many opportunities and platforms to build and engage a geographically dispersed group. The academic components of the PDI curriculum were conducted online to account for alumni being dispersed across the country. In-person retreats and a cohort trip to Israel were built into the program, in part to provide network- and relationship-building opportunities the online learning platform could not offer. This approach did not come without its challenges. Some subjects, such as a foreign language, were difficult to learn via an online platform, and relationship building was limited. Overall, program activities should be delivered via a platform that both reaches the intended audience and supports the intended learning outcomes.

6. Strong professional networks take intentional planning, building and maintenance.

Programs like PDI that employ a cohort model have a built-in system for personal support that people can draw upon as they move through the program. A network of professionals benefits both the individuals, and if the participants work within the same field, their broader field: it offers personal and professional support, a platform to share resources and job opportunities, and a forum for idea exchange.
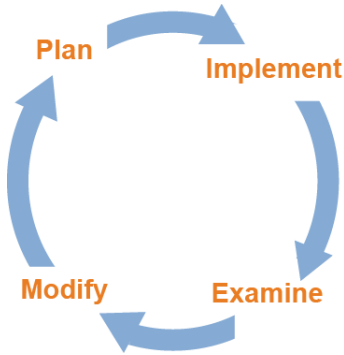
However, networks do not build themselves; they need to be nourished. PDI alumni say they did not have enough touch-points to allow for building deep relationships, particularly across cohorts. Formal network activities may include in-person meetings, unstructured networking time, group activities and trips. More informal and inexpensive mechanisms, such as online communities and job boards, can keep participants up-to-date on news from their colleagues. Although the network may be a lasting program outcome,

as time goes on, the structure of the network will grow less formal, especially as facilitated networking opportunities phase out. Ongoing activity, matched with clearly articulated expectations about network members' participation during and after formal program involvement, is key to maintaining an active and dynamic network.

7. Pilot new strategies and make program adjustments when needed.

PDI's funder, The Jim Joseph Foundation, strategically invested in ongoing program evaluation from the beginning of PDI, which provided feedback on the program's design. While PDI was able to make some adjustments to the design based on evaluation findings, the relatively quick roll-out of each annual cohort, and the significant monetary and multi-year time commitment necessary for a long-term degree program, meant that staff did not have time to make significant modifications. By the time feedback and learnings were clarified from the first cohort, the second cohort was well on its way.

Newly designed professional development programs could benefit from using a pilot period to test the program's theories and design, potentially with a small first cohort. Also, building in sufficient time before the start of a second cohort and evaluating progress from the start can provide insight into the program's successes and challenges. Intentional feedback and assessment loops are critical for learning about recruitment efforts (e.g., quantity and quality of candidates interested in the program), effectiveness of program supports (e.g., quality, sequencing and combination of elements), initial outcomes (e.g., alignment with the program's overall purpose) and the reception of the program.

8. Weigh potential costs, risks and benefits of new initiatives.

When considering the overall effectiveness of a professional development endeavor, it is important to consider what it takes to produce successful results. There are opportunity costs to consider.

In PDI's case, the program generated a variety of positive outcomes, particularly related to the alumni's education, professional growth and development, which has already begun to serve their organizations and will likely serve the sector for years to come. At the same time, the per-participant cost and the programmatic requirements were intensive.

The program covered the cost of the MBA and the certificate in informal Jewish education completely, which was a main attraction for most alumni. If alumni were asked to contribute financially at some level toward these educational components while keeping the program accessible, might there have been differences in program outcomes, recruitment results or performance in the program? Could another, less costly, management- or business-focused program have educated PDI professionals as well as the MBA program? Weighing the costs of an endeavor together with the potential benefits and risks from the outset can help determine how to move forward strategically.
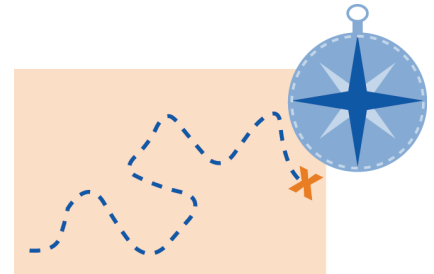
Program Audience

PDI was carefully planned to fill gaps in professional skill, knowledge and ability within BBYO—supplying their early- to mid-career professionals with tools and knowledge to provide quality youth programming and to be strong professionals. Based on alumni's experience through the program, we offer the following for planning professional development programs and opportunities.

9. Meet professionals where they are in their careers.

PDI alumni entered the program with diverse backgrounds—they had varying levels of professional experience, Jewish education, advanced degrees and clarity of their ongoing career path in the Jewish community. In a scenario like this, it is advantageous to have a curriculum that can be adapted to best meet the needs and incoming skill levels of new participants and cohorts. For example, some PDI alumni might have benefited from more advanced courses, though PDI did not have the flexibility to offer this level of customization.

Early-career professionals may need general training and education about their specific field or job responsibilities. They also need opportunities to build a broad range of skills from the general to the specific, as well as a clear understanding of potential career paths. Mid-career professionals on the other hand, may simply need to hone specific skills to advance along a defined career path. While curricula should meet these professionals where they are, the program should also offer opportunities for participants to "stretch" beyond their current skill levels and responsibilities.

Employment trends among millennials:

- Millennials are holding more jobs throughout their work lives. They expect to work at six or more companies.[3]

- Millennials expect to stay at a job for less than three years. "Job hopping" can be used as a strategy to get ahead: Instead of staying at a company for promotion, they may switch jobs to obtain a better position.[4]

- Young people also leave jobs for lack of training or mentors who can support their professional development.[5]

- Millennials enjoy meaningful work. They are motivated by opportunity and the quality of the working environment.[6]

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[3] Faw, L. (2012). "How Millennials Are Redefining Their Careers as Hustlers." *Forbes.* Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/larissafaw/2012/07/19/how-millennials-are-redefining-their-careers-as-hustlers/

[4] Meister, J. (2012). "Job Hopping Is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare." *Forbes.* Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/

[5] Chapin, A. (2013, March 11). "Generation Y Workplace: Millennials Who Quit Jobs To Get Ahead." *Huffington Post.* Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/03/11/generation-y-workplace-jobs-quitting_n_2828150.html

[6] London Business Strategy Review (2014). "The Price of Doing Business With Generation Y." *Forbes.* Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/lbsbusinessstrategyreview/2014/03/25/the-price-of-doing-business-with-generation-y/

10. Know the target audience and candidate pool.

PDI was custom-built for early-career professionals in BBYO. Cohort 1 was limited to BBYO employees, whereas recruitment in subsequent cohorts included professionals who were invited to join PDI and then hired as BBYO employees. Despite expanded recruitment efforts, PDI did not attract as many professionals to the program as originally planned.

PDI provides a good reminder of the need to assess the pool of potential candidates, both initially as well as after a few years of a program's lifespan, in case the pool of potential candidates diminishes or the cadre of program alumni are adequately meeting the sector's employment needs. In the event that the expected number of high-quality candidates is lower than desired, program coordinators may need to weigh their options. This could include running the program with a smaller cohort (the path that PDI took), shifting program activities, creating multiple program tracks to meet the skill level and characteristics of interested candidates, placing the program on hiatus until a critical mass of qualified candidates can be recruited, or shifting recruitment strategies.

11. For larger professional development programs, determine whether participants will be from one or many organizations.

The PDI model—which guaranteed employment at BBYO during program-related academic pursuit and required two years of employment in the Jewish community following graduation—had two goals. In the short term, PDI would increase BBYO's internal capacities and strengthen the organization. Over the longer term, it aimed to develop new and talented professionals who would go on to support the broader Jewish communal sector later in their careers

PDI demonstrated that there are potential benefits and tradeoffs when hosting a sector-wide professional development program within one organization.

Exhibit 3
Tradeoffs of Professional Development Within One Host Organization

- **PRO** Increase employee retention and delay turnover

- **PRO** Show that organizations take care of employees and instill in employees a sense of being valued

- **PRO** Improve quality and operation of programs or services at an organization

- **CON** Overload the organizational leadership pipeline with employees that have similarly specialized training when only a limited number can advance

- **CON** Potentially create tension between employees who are selected for a program and staff who feel excluded from the program

However, widening participation in a professional development across an entire sector also has its own benefits and tradeoffs.

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Exhibit 4

Tradeoffs of Professional Development Across an Entire Sector

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- **PRO** Create a wider (and potentially higher-quality) pool of potential applicants

- **PRO** Spread well-developed talent across a sector, with the potential of improving a number of organizations

- **PRO** Create a wider and more diverse (e.g., in experiences, positions) professional network

- **CON** Present difficulties in aligning program mission with multiple organizations

- **CON** Create difficulties in scheduling program components at times that are convenient across organizations

Team-based learning is another option for sector-wide programs that opens opportunities for increased impact and strengthened outcomes. A small team of 2–5 staff members from a single organization can develop a shared experience, language and skill set within that team while also learning from and networking with colleagues outside their current organizations. This collective experience can help leverage new learnings and lead to cohesive and collaborative organizational improvements and innovations.

Employers' Role in Professional Development

Although large-scale and ongoing professional development programs can be of great benefit to individuals and networks, they cannot be successful on their own. Employers also play a critical role in supporting ongoing learning and professional growth. Work environments need to be open to learning and champion innovation in order to support professionals in their ongoing pursuit for growth. Skilled and trained supervisors can guide professionals through an organization and identify new skill needs, alongside opportunities to practice those skills and chart a career path within the organization. Without an environment open to career advancement and a vision of professional growth, professional development pursuits may fall flat. Professionals will lack the opportunity to refine new skills and will be at risk of becoming stagnant or moving to another organization that supports them in their growth.

CONCLUSION & MOVING FORWARD

Leaders continue to direct their attention to new, innovative ways to increase individuals' capacity through training and professional development opportunities while simultaneously meeting the shifting employee landscape as more and more millennials join the workforce. After all, nonprofit organizations need high-quality staff to deliver on their missions. On-the-job learning, mentorship, and formalized education and training programs are needed to continue to support growing leaders while also retaining seasoned professionals in the field.

Leaders across the nonprofit sector have a number of strategic questions to consider related to retaining and developing talent. These questions range from considering what types of education are most beneficial in which circumstances and how to effectively establish and maintain an organizational culture that supports professional development, to the tension of helping professionals do their jobs better today while also preparing them for the future.

PDI has contributed to these discussions by testing new approaches to professional development. As the program comes to a close, it surfaces the lessons shared in this brief and provides a case study for practitioners and employers to look to when building future endeavors. As the discussion of professional development continues in the nonprofit sector, the considerations and practices that emerged through the PDI experience can hopefully strengthen development opportunities going forward.

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