



# Advancing Early-Stage Jewish Careers:

*Lessons from BBYO's Professional Development Institute*

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Foundation*

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## INTRODUCTION

How to strategically provide professional development opportunities is an ongoing conversation in the nonprofit world. The Jewish communal sector, in particular, faces challenges attracting new, qualified professionals to fill leadership and professional roles as these opportunities become available. Ultimately, such staffing challenges undermine program and service quality. These challenges have been documented, most recently in the 2014 report, *Cultivating the Next Generation of Leaders for Jewish Nonprofits*, which describes how Jewish nonprofits struggle to develop and advance *current* leaders while also struggling to attract *new* leaders.

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 2007, BBYO embarked upon an ambitious program called the Professional Development Institute (PDI), to increase the capacity and commitment of talented, Jewish professionals to build a career in the Jewish community. In the short term, PDI was designed to support early-career professionals at BBYO in their work engaging and educating teens. 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 in the Jewish communal sector overall.

PDI was one organization's strategy for addressing these particular challenges related to recruiting, developing and retaining talented Jewish professionals. While certainly not an exhaustive list, other organizations are making ongoing contributions to professional growth in the Jewish community through both broad reaching and more customized approaches:

- The recently launched Schusterman Fellowship, a program of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, is a custom-built professional development experience for both professional and volunteer leaders in the Jewish community.
- The Foundation for Jewish Camp's *Lekhu Lakhem* provides camp directors with enriching Jewish experiences and learning opportunities, professional development, and customized guidance about their role at camp.
- The Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership offers graduate programs in Jewish studies, Jewish professional studies and nonprofit management that ground education, management training, leadership development and exploration of Jewish life in Jewish wisdom and culture.
- The Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education offers the Day School Leadership Training Institute focused on supporting day school professionals with content knowledge, practical skills and new tools.
- The Wexner Graduate Fellowship and Davidson Scholars offer cohort- and degree-based programs for graduate students training for careers in the Cantorate, Jewish Education, Jewish Professional Leadership, Jewish Studies, the Rabbinate and other full-time professionals working in the Jewish communal sector.
- The Mandel Center for Leadership Excellence offers a graduate studies scholarship and leadership development program in return for a minimum two-year paid work commitment in a North American Jewish Federation.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> To make the program accessible to BBYO professionals working across the nation, the model employed a mix of online learning and in-person retreats. 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. 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.

### Exhibit 1 PDI Program Elements



**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 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 and 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.

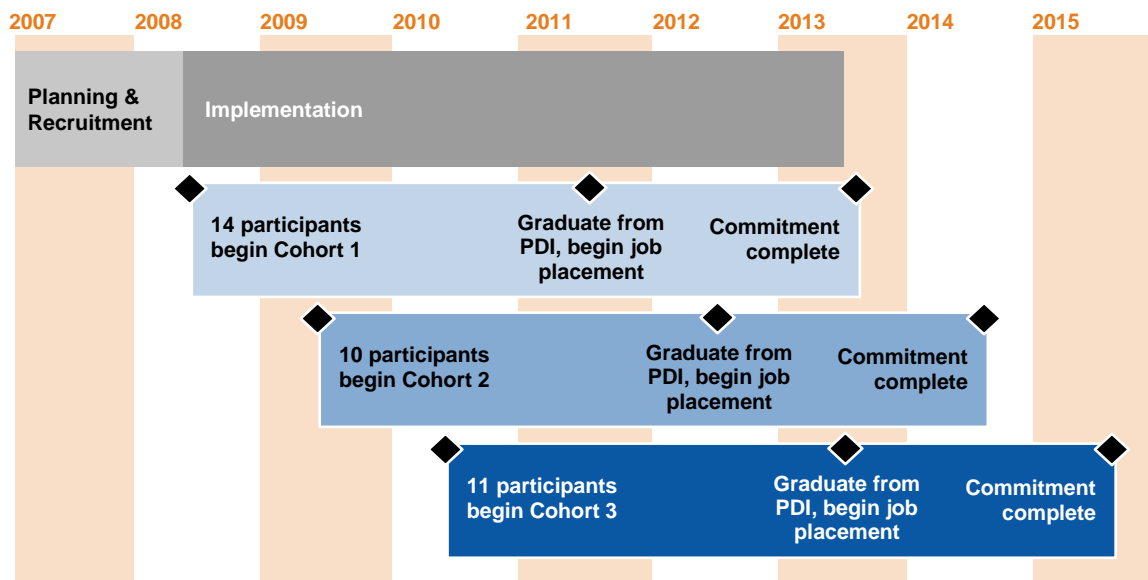
### Three cohorts of professionals attended PDI and fulfilled their commitment requirement from 2008 through 2015.

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, increasing their business

<sup>1</sup> The term alumni is used to refer to all participants across all three cohorts.

knowledge, skills and confidence; enhancing their understanding of the Jewish community; and providing a personal sense of Jewish connection to their work.

Exhibit 2  
PDI Timeline



## 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.<sup>2</sup>

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. 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*.

This brief is intended for funders, employers and professionals working in the Jewish communal sector who are interested in designing professional development supports within the community as formal programs or on-the-job learning opportunities. Informing Change offers the following elements to consider when embarking on professional development endeavors.

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<sup>2</sup> Each year, Informing Change conducted individual telephone interviews with each PDI alum and either their mentor, a colleague or a supervisor. Additional data collection included 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.

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## LESSONS FROM PDI

### Program Model & Planning

The PDI model comprised many elements and opportunities for participants. Based on the individual strengths of these components and the alumni's experience with them collectively, we offer the following considerations and lessons about designing professional development programs in the Jewish community.

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

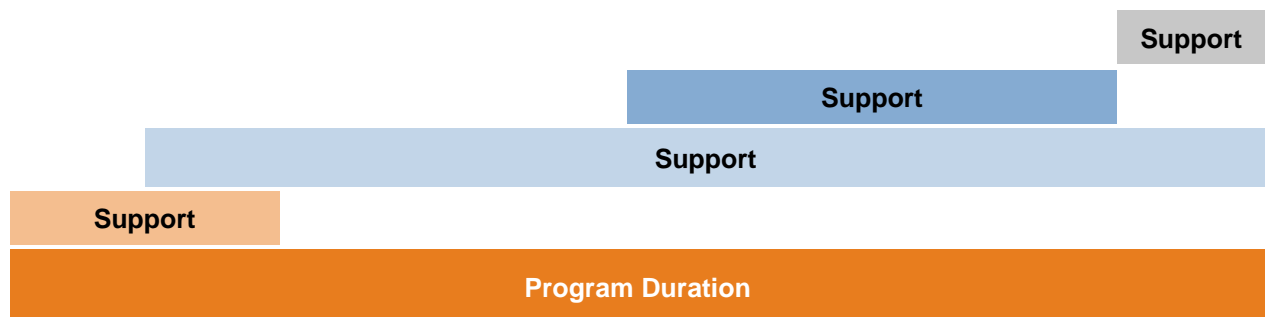
To develop leaders and professionals in the Jewish community, their training, education and development should address the particular needs of the sector along with the roles and responsibilities of managers and leaders. PDI carefully chose two academic paths: an MBA to build hard skills—management skills 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 at BBYO specifically and, in time, the broader sector, by building staff capacity to provide engaging Jewish educational experiences and developing a highly skilled management tier.



Pursuing a generalist degree—the MBA—was a departure from many other professional development opportunities in the Jewish communal sector that look to other Jewish institutions and credentials for management and other types of training. 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. Providing opportunities to tailor the curriculum specifically to the Jewish community or supporting participants in making connections between the generalist degree and the specific needs of the Jewish communal sector could help bridge this gap.

#### 2. Sequence professional development supports to maximize impact.

The sequence and timing of supports can be just as important as the supports themselves. PDI provided many supports 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, often with non-traditional work hours. 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.



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

PDI's full-time employment gave alumni opportunities to put new knowledge into practice on the job. The type of position they held influenced their ability to apply specific program learnings. For example, participants who worked in administrative, marketing and fundraising positions had more opportunities to apply their MBA learnings, whereas those alumni working on teen programming had more opportunities to apply the Jewish education 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. Through their capstone projects, most PDI alumni completed projects related to BBYO's youth programming or operations, allowing them to explore their own interests, exercise skills gained in the program and simultaneously introduce potential changes to BBYO. This can be a win-win for the employee and employer.

Supervisors and managers can help identify opportunities for participants to try out and implement new learnings. It is also important to recognize that some learning may not be immediately applicable, but rather help prepare participants for future career growth.

### 4. Individualized supports go a long way.

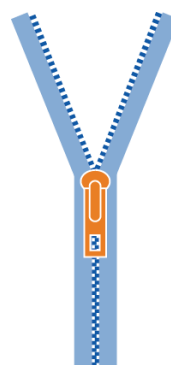
Having opportunities for customized professional development to address individual participants' needs in addition to those addressed in the formal program allows for deeper focus and reflection and accounts for people having different learning styles. In PDI, alumni were matched with a mentor—a tenured Jewish community 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.



Looking to the Jewish community to provide one-on-one support through mentoring and coaching ensures that participants' experiences are grounded in the Jewish community, increases the community's investment in the development of these professionals and provides the potential to raise the prominence of professional development in the community. Strategic community partners—staff and leaders at other Jewish organizations, lay leaders, foundations staff, rabbis, Jewish educators or middle managers—can all help fill these mentoring and coaching roles.

### 5. Align learning platforms with program goals.

With the rise of online learning, there are now many opportunities and platforms to engage and build 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 that the online learning platform could not offer. This approach did not come without its challenges.



For example, online learning is not conducive to building deep relationships among peers, and learning a language, like Hebrew, can be difficult to achieve online. PDI alumni struggled with these aspects of the learning platform. Overall, program activities should be delivered via a platform that both reaches the intended audience and supports the intended learning outcomes. Opportunities with language learning and relationship building outcomes should consider alternative platforms.

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

PDI alumni stress the importance of their cohort, which provided them with personal support and the beginnings of a professional network. At the same time, they wish they had developed stronger connections to broaden their networks even further. PDI alumni say they did not have enough touch-points to allow for building deep relationships, particularly across cohorts. Post-graduation engagement for PDI alumni was not initially planned, and when program coordinators explored this option mid-way through the program, they decided not to pursue it based, in part, on a lack of interest from alumni at that time.

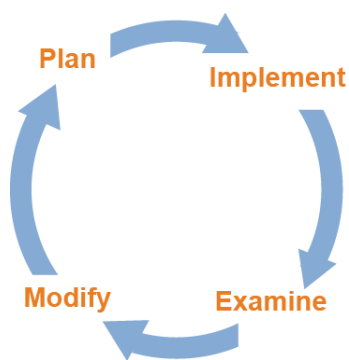
Having a network of Jewish communal professionals benefits both the individuals and the broader community: it offers personal and professional support, a platform to share resources and job opportunities, and a space for idea exchange. Programs that employ a cohort model have a built-in system for personal support that participants can draw upon as they move through the program. In the Jewish community, in particular, a growing, strengthening network can help retain committed professionals in the sector by providing a sense of community, connection and belonging. Ideally, the network also strengthens the sector by supporting individuals in the network, retaining them in the field and promoting collaboration among high-quality professionals.



However, networks do not build themselves; they need to be planned and nourished. Formal network activities may include in-person meetings, unstructured networking time, group activities and trips. More informal and inexpensive mechanisms, such as online communities, email blasts and sector-wide job boards, can keep participants up-to-date on news from their fellow participants and in touch with the community. 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.

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 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 or other long-term initiatives could benefit from using a pilot period to test the program's theories and design, potentially with a smaller 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. PDI has already supported staffing in the field for a minimum of five years per alumni, something that may not have happened otherwise for this particular group of professionals. Ultimately, PDI has the potential to provide the Jewish community with a group of well-trained professionals who can support 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.

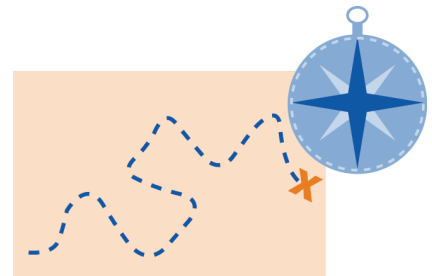
### Program Audience

**PDI was carefully planned to fill gaps in professional skill, knowledge and ability within BBYO—supplying early- to mid-career professionals with tools and knowledge to provide quality youth programming and to become strong managers and leaders. Based on alumni's experiences in PDI, we offer the following strategies to keep in mind related to the professionals themselves.**

## 9. Meet professionals where they are in their careers.

PDI alumni entered the program from various starting points. Most, but not all, were early-career professionals; some had previous formal Jewish education; some were more certain than others of their intent to choose a career path in the Jewish communal sector. 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, specifically in the area of Jewish experiential education, though PDI did not have the flexibility to offer this level of customization.

In the Jewish community, early-career professionals may need general education about the Jewish communal landscape and exposure to the spectrum of opportunities and potential career paths within the sector. They also need opportunities to build a broad range of skills from the general (e.g., management, communication, development), to the specific (e.g., balancing a budget, setting SMART goals, Midrash, Hebrew, experiential education practices theory). Mid-career professionals on the other hand, particularly those who have already expressed a commitment to the sector, 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.





Based on learnings from PDI and the expertise of Jewish community leaders, **early-career professionals in the Jewish Communal Sector...**

- Are drawn to working in this sector in part because it is mission-driven. They want to find a sense of meaning and importance in the work they are doing.
- Look for a sense of community and belonging. Therefore, they value professional networks that include peers and other colleagues within the community. At the same time, early-career professionals also value having colleagues who work outside the Jewish community in their networks to avoid feeling professionally “pigeon-holed” in Jewish communal organizations.
- Value work-home balance. They take into account personal needs and commitments when making career decisions. They believe this will help them avoid burnout and participate fully in family life, while they honor their professional commitments.
- Often need on-the-job experience before advancing in their careers. Even with training, they want and need time to settle into their positions, continuing to build their skills and put theory into practice. This is true for many professionals, including those who have earned higher degrees.
- May be uncertain of or not committed to a long-term “career path,” though they may be committed to ongoing learning. They find value in working fluidly across sectors, organizations and roles. They recognize that learnings from one sector (e.g., business) can be brought into another sector (e.g., Jewish community), and that job availability and opportunities for growth may vary between these two sectors, further influencing their decisions regarding career path.

## 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 consider and weigh their options. This could include running the program with a smaller cohort (the path that PDI took), shifting program activities or 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 the program and required two years of Jewish communal sector employment after graduation—had two goals. In the short term, PDI would increase BBYO’s internal capacities and strengthen the organization, and 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 professional development across an entire sector also has its own benefits and tradeoffs.

### Exhibit 4

#### Tradeoffs of Professional Development Across an Entire Sector

- **PRO** Provide access to a wider, and potentially higher quality, pool of applicants
- **PRO** Spread newly developed talent across the Jewish community, with the potential of improving a number of organizations
- **PRO** Create a wider and more diverse (e.g., 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

The Jewish community is home to a vast network of organizations that could benefit from a community-wide, multi-organizational professional development model, including new, nonaffiliated and small organizations, as well as more traditional and established institutions. There are many ways organizations within these networks could be grouped for professional development, such as convening a group of smaller organizations with similar focus or staffing structure or bringing together movement-based organizations or synagogues across the continent or a particular geographic region.

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.

### Supportive Organizational Environments – What Can Organizations Do?

Organizational environments are an important piece of the puzzle in supporting professional development in the Jewish communal sector, whether professional development is offered through a formal program or simply facilitated through on-the-job learning. Community stakeholders and PDI alumni suggest that organizational capacity to support professional learning and growth in the Jewish community has limits. The following organizational structures and concepts—for nonprofits both within the Jewish community and more broadly—can help support professionals' ongoing learning, success and employment satisfaction.

- Keep in mind a **long-term vision** of developing high-quality staff rather than passing up professional development opportunities due to limited time or organizational resources.
- Remain **open to learning and professional development**, which can provide employees with new challenges and opportunities to acquire, practice and apply new skills, and allow them to grow in their day-to-day roles while contributing to organizational goals.
- Celebrate **change and innovation**, both within individual organizations as well as across the sector overall.
- Provide skilled and trained **supervisors** who can support professionals and offer the opportunity for development. For early- to mid-career professionals, effective supervision can help guide professionals through the organization, identify gaps in skills for further development and help supervisees succeed.
- Identify and articulate **clear career paths and growth opportunities** in the organization and across the Jewish community. Often, advancement opportunities are limited—either they are already filled or there are few. To attract and retain the next generation of leaders, employers can identify career paths or re-imagine organizational structures to nurture and retain developing professionals.
- Ensure that **equitable, adequate and competitive compensation** accompanies mission-driven work. This specifically arises as a concern for early- to mid-career professionals who are already supporting or planning to start supporting their families.
- Build a **merit-based culture** that values and recognizes high-quality achievements and demonstrates a commitment to ongoing professional development.
- Identify opportunities to **collaborate** with other organizations across the Jewish community to support sector-wide professional development.

## CONCLUSION & MOVING FORWARD

Jewish organizations need high-quality professionals 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. How best to provide these opportunities is not a new conversation in the Jewish communal sector, but its importance has been recently elevated. Leaders are directing their attention to new, innovative ways to address sector-wide challenges to attract and retain the professionals needed to support the community's needs.

Leaders across the Jewish communal sector have a number of strategic questions to consider related to developing talent. These questions range from considering what types of education are most beneficial in which circumstances (e.g., considering a generalist degree or a credential offered through a Jewish institution), to the role of personal learning, 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 Jewish community practitioners and employers to look to when building future endeavors. As the discussion of professional development continues in the Jewish communal sector, the considerations and practices that emerged through the PDI experience can hopefully strengthen development opportunities going forward.

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