

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP CENTER

ENGAGING NEW TALENT TO LEAD CHANGE FOR THE NEXT JEWISH COMMUNITY

A THOUGHT-PIECE SUBMITTED BY LARRY MOSES TO THE JIM JOSEPH FOUNDATION

“The national Jewish community appears to be on the edge of a precipice. Within the next five to ten years, the baby boomers will retire and leave upwards of 75-90% of Jewish community agencies with the challenge of finding new executive leadership... The emerging executive leadership crisis may require system-wide approaches. Otherwise, we will be in a continuous cycle of organizations stealing the best and the brightest from each other, without a wide enough bench to fill all the positions”

From “Executive Development and Succession Planning: A Growing Challenge for the American Jewish Community” – Michael Austin and Tracy Salkowitz, 2009

“An alarmingly low percentage (18%) of Jewish nonprofits have emergency back-up plans (EBPs) in place... An even lower percentage (only 9%) maintain succession plans for top professional leadership. Another way of interpreting this sobering finding is that 91% of the organizations surveyed are not engaging in effective planning nor assuming any real accountability for sustaining their leadership succession.”

From “Effective CEO Transitioning/Leadership Sustainability in North American Jewish Nonprofit Organizations” – Steven J. Noble, 2012

“If you’re not developing your ‘high potentials,’ you’re going to pay for it later and the cost is going to be a lot more than you think.”

– Dr. Marshall Goldsmith

“Great things are accomplished by talented people who believe they will accomplish them”

– Warren Bennis

“If we did all of the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.”

– Thomas A. Edison

I. INTRODUCTION

All important endeavors in human life are talent-driven. This is no less the case in Jewish communal life. Our institutions will rise or fall, stagnate or renew, on the basis of talent, both professional and volunteer. Yet the Jewish community as a whole invests little in the development of professional talent. Entry level training programs are disconnected from the organizations and constituencies they seek to serve, and are underfunded and isolated. Continuing professional education is spotty at best, better in some communities than others, in some organizations than others. The Jewish professional field is highly decentralized and suffers from a lack of clear-cut credentials and well-defined skills and competencies. At a time when the need for dynamic executive skills, innovation, and new thinking in Jewish life has never been more pressing, the talent pool seems to be shrinking rather than growing.

New efforts to professionalize Jewish communal life have thankfully begun, and of necessity operate in many different directions: recruitment, training, curricula, credential re-thinking, early and mid-career continuing professional training, bridging the gender gap, enhancing search and placement services, and more. This paper aspires to outline a potential intervention in but one area – that of executive development, specifically for mid-career Jewish communal professionals, and those who will enter the field from other professional sectors, who will soon be challenged not only to assume the highest executive responsibilities in Jewish organizations, but at the same time to reinvent Jewish life in profound ways – to build “the next Jewish community.”

II. THE IDEA: A CENTER FOR EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT – TALENT, TRANSITIONING, AND INVENTING THE NEXT JEWISH COMMUNITY

Much is made about numbers in Jewish life – the number of people we reach, influence, and impact. Most Jewish community accountability measures relate to the numbers game. Developing talent and identifying and training leaders call for a different measure. In 1957, the distinguished scholar Salo W. Baron wrote that “if the next generation of American Jews will harbor 100 truly first rate scholars... 100 first rate writers... 100 first rate rabbis... 100 first rate lay leaders... one could look forward confidently to American Judaism’s reaching new heights.”

Baron’s quote reveals that when it comes to leaders and talent, the quantity measures are less significant than the quality measures. And indeed, we have all witnessed how one inspired leader can transform an organization, a community, even the Jewish people.

As one generation of top Jewish professional leaders prepares to depart our national, regional, and local agencies, we have not adequately prepared a new generation of leaders to take on the critical changes we face as a community. A Center for Executive Development would not only identify and train cohorts of outstanding mid-careerists (Executive Fellows), but would do so in an environment of innovation and invention – understanding that this generation will be challenged to rethink and reshape Jewish life. The raw talent of individuals is not sufficient. Talent in tandem with others around emergent visions of change will make this Center different than prior efforts.

The Center would aspire to:

- A. Develop a set of executive learning opportunities around a curriculum of core skills and competencies to prepare the most promising mid-careerists for top executive positions in Jewish communal life. The Executive Fellows would be suitable for top positions in national agencies, Jewish Federations and local agencies, educational programs and institutions, and new collaborations and ventures. Participants would receive state-of-the-art training in management, strategic thinking, organizational development, and leadership skills to lead change effectively in Jewish organizational life.
 1. *One target population would be high-potential individuals currently working in Jewish settings.*
 2. *Another target population would be high-potential individuals not currently working in Jewish settings, but capable of transitioning into such work.*
- B. Serve as an incubator for new ideas and strategies for change in Jewish life. More than a think tank, the Center would become a space where the interplay of ideas would ultimately take shape in the very practice of the individuals who propose them. In this sense, the Center would both serve as an executive training program AND a type of “Jewish” Aspen Institute – a high-minded, safe place where new thinking will be valued rather than discounted.
- C. Serve as an educational and professional resource in accessing best practices in executive education in related non-profit disciplines and fields, and more clearly identify the skill gaps and educational needs for Jewish communal executives specifically. Develop a Jewish leadership literature merging the best of leadership theory/thinking with values and challenges uniquely Jewish.
- D. Serve as a public advocate around issues of succession planning and executive transitioning in Jewish life.

- E. Develop materials and opportunities for sitting executives and volunteer leaders to derive succession plans and timetables and simultaneously groom new executive talent.
- F. Establish standards and certification opportunities for those who seek executive positions in Jewish life. Work with Jewish training institutions and organizational programs to bolster high-quality executive education in their curricula.

The Center would be pluralistic, independent of any singular Jewish communal organization or funder, and encompass individuals who seek to lead a wide range of Jewish communal and educational institutions. Cohorts would be enriched by a diversity of outlooks and aspirations. After the yearlong fellowship experience, cohorts would be convened through ongoing symposia and retreats for continuing learning and mentoring opportunities.

In an age when Jewish life is increasingly decentralized and fragmented, the learning culture of the Center would focus on the commonalities and connections which are critical in envisioning the next Jewish community.

The Center would be affiliated and work closely with at least two major academic institutions, perhaps Harvard's Center for Public Leadership and Stanford University's business school, as bases for developing cutting-edge executive programs geared specifically to the next professional leaders of American Jewish life. In addition to executive education, mentoring, team projects, and writing exercises would be part of the executive fellowship experience.

Finally, the Center would prepare the Executive Fellows to work with an entirely new generation of volunteer leaders, and secure the input of emergent volunteer leaders in the ongoing development and implementation of the Center's work.

III. A CLOSING THOUGHT

If fifteen outstanding Executive Fellows could undergo such training each year, within five years there would be five cohorts of top professionals, 75 individuals in all, highly networked among each other, assuming high-level community and national positions in Jewish life, and carrying innovations and new-thinking as a result of their relationships and learning experiences. Imagine what 75 such well-placed and personally networked leaders could accomplish, both "on the ground" and in terms of changing the culture and mindset of Jewish organizational life.

The Center is best established as an independent entity – a funding collaboration among a group of forward thinking philanthropists/foundations. The impending "crisis" in executive succession has aroused strong concern in the Jewish funders' community, making the prospect for such a coalition timely. The Center would be accountable to trustees consisting of executives, academics, volunteer leaders, funders, and private sector organizational leaders.

The Center, in essence, would not only be a place for imparting high-level competencies to particularly gifted individuals, but – equally important – it would be a "creative space" for imagination and innovation, a place where the Jewish future can incubate in the hearts and minds of the very individuals who will lead the community forward.