

An Experiment in Learning Two New Languages:

JFNA's Next Gen Jewish Federation Fellowship

January 2021

a Jim Joseph Foundation Case Study

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As educators, we have the possibility of looking from different points of view and asking our audience to look at things with complexity, not from our point of view alone.

Chaya Gilboa, Director of Jewish Engagement, Leichtag Foundation

On a sunny morning in January 2020, the 19 participants in The Jewish Federations of North America's Next Gen Jewish Federation Fellowship¹ sit in a boardroom overlooking Leichtag Ranch just outside San Diego. They're discussing the power and importance of productive conflict with their guest speaker, Chaya Gilboa. Gilboa deftly guides them through a Torah source to unpack the complexity and challenges of contemporary leadership in the Jewish world. Serendipitously, with the statement above, she illuminates both the ingenuity and complexity of the Next Gen program structure.

The Fellows, hailing from 17 Federations across North America, fill a variety of roles, typically intended to engage young adults like themselves in their local Federation communities. Most Fellows work in the areas of donor cultivation and relationship building. Others serve as direct engagement professionals, stewarding and encouraging their local Jewish community members to find and participate in Jewish experiences that make sense for them. The great majority have been Jewish communal professionals for more than five years and are participating in their first ever intensive cohort-based experience of professional development.

Generously funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Next Gen Fellowship was created to jumpstart innovation and leadership in the field of young adult Jewish engagement. The program functions as a kind of grand experiment. It is the first time JFNA has undertaken a professional development initiative of this scope, and its leaders have been ready to make mid-course corrections if needed, especially between one cohort and the next.

Its central goal is to elevate the importance and impact of Federation-based efforts to meaningfully engage young adults with Jewish community. First, the program exposes Fellows—all of whom are in early-to-mid stages of their careers—to broad learning experiences that are meant to develop their individual leadership skills and deepen their readiness and capacity to serve as Jewish educators. At the same time, the cohort-based structure and incorporation of applied learning projects allows the program

¹ Observations in this case are derived from the second cohort and cycle of the Next Gen Jewish Federation Fellowship, which began in May 2019 and was ongoing at the time of this writing.

to scale impact well beyond the growth of individual participants. By fostering Fellows' relationships with one another and by having them immediately put their learnings into practice in the Next Gen space, the program seeks to seed a resource-rich network of professionals working on similar issues in different Federation communities that will raise the visibility and creativity of engagement work with young adult Jews in the Federation system and beyond.

As Rabbi David Kessel, the Associate Vice President for Young Leadership and Next Gen Engagement at JFNA, explains, the overarching goal of the program is to:

Create a group of professional leaders in the Jewish community that have unique expertise, wisdom, talent, [and] depth in engaging and deepening the commitment of young people [to Jewish life]. Their work will have a cascading effect across the Federation, but also across all the other organizations that partner in this space: OneTable, Moishe House, Birthright. ... Fellows will be learning and building their own skills [to become] thought leaders and practice leaders for the larger field. Their work is not meant to be done in a vacuum; it's intended to stimulate something new.

JFNA has generated an ambitious program to achieve this. Because this is a first foray for JFNA in the field of cohort-based professional development, the Next Gen team chose not to rely on in-house expertise alone to realize these outcomes. Instead, it identified two best-in-class providers with whom to partner: the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. Each partner facilitates different aspects of the 20-month program. This three-way partnership opens “the possibility of looking from different points of view and asking [Fellows] to look at things with complexity.” With deep knowledge and expertise in leadership development, the Center for Creative Leadership was charged with supporting Fellows' exploration of their personal leadership styles and deepening their capacity for effective Federation leadership. M² was tasked with helping Fellows integrate Jewish values and academic research in the service of becoming proficient in innovative methods and approaches to collaborative Jewish learning.

With JFNA's guidance and coordination, the teams from CCL and M² alternate in facilitating three weeklong in-person learning retreats for Fellows over the course of the two-year program.² These retreats are interspersed by JFNA-led webinars and check-ins, leadership coaching from CCL in the first half of the program, and professional mentorship from M² in the second half of the program. During the latter half of the program, JFNA staff lead Fellows through an applied learning practicum. With matched funding between JFNA and the Fellows' local Federations, the practicum calls program participants to conceptualize, refine, and implement an innovative initiative for Next Gen engagement in their local Jewish community. (See Appendix for how the various program components are organized.)

² CCL's second retreat with Next Gen cohort 2 was shortened significantly to accommodate a virtual format in the wake of 2020's pandemic shelter-in-place orders.

It is not difficult to see how the work of all three partner organizations speaks directly to Next Gen program goals. Nevertheless, a curious aspect of this professional development program is that, despite the vastly different content and approaches taken by the organizations involved, the three do not work directly with one another to integrate content and experiences for Fellows. Program facilitators rarely draw explicit connections between the content and experiences they deliver and that of their programmatic partners. It seems as if the Next Gen team has only modest expectations for ultimately integrating these various parts.

How, then, do Fellows make sense of the tremendous quantity of disparate programming and content in the program? What is the special pedagogical value of this composite program structure, characterized by one of the program's shapers as a kind of hopscotch?

The JFNA team works closely but separately with CCL and M² to curate and compose experiences that will be meaningful for Fellows in different ways, with the tacit understanding that each Fellow will make sense of their program learnings and experiences differently. In an information session with Fellows just before the San Diego retreat with M², Fellows asked program leaders about the connection between the leadership work they did with CCL the year before and the relational engagement work they were about to do with M². Director Eva Stern articulated the connection between program experiences in this way:

Imposing integration isn't always the most effective strategy. Some of it will come from the leaders of the Fellowship, but much of it will come more effectively from you. As you speak up as part of your groups and in one-on-one conversations, share how the different facets of this are resonating with you, and what discoveries you are encountering. ... As you share that with each other, you may really inspire each other. Speak up and share the integration—where do you see the leadership coming out?

Without an overarching theoretical framework that explains how and why all of the material presented to them is connected, the best way to conceive of the process the Fellows undertake is one of learning two distinct languages. First, they learn the language of leadership with CCL, utilizing frameworks and concepts to make sense of their professional roles and experiences. They then immerse themselves in the language of Jewish engagement and education with M², an experience which challenges them to explore what truly matters to them and the Jewish communities they serve. Finally, with the guidance of JFNA, Fellows are asked to express themselves in these languages by designing and implementing an applied project in Next Gen Jewish engagement. Learning a new language can be challenging. Learning two at the same time can be confusing. And yet, by acquiring two systems for making meaning of their worlds and their work, they do seem to gain new and powerful ways to express themselves and their aspirations.

The CCL Approach: Learning the Language of Leadership

CCL takes a highly structured approach to leadership development, offering ready-made concepts, theoretical frameworks, and research-based tools for Fellows to better understand their personal strengths and challenges as leaders. Rather than prompting Fellows to interpret, intuit, or construct meaning for themselves, Fellows walk away from CCL experiences with useful resources that they can apply in their professional contexts. At the first retreat for Next Gen’s second cohort of Fellows, in May 2019, the CCL team defined leadership as:

A collective, social process, that is characterized by three outcomes: direction, alignment, and commitment. When we look at a group, do they have direction [in what they are doing]? Alignment refers to who will do what, when. ... Commitment is about whether you would go beyond your personal needs [for the group]. When you have those three things, you have effective leadership. —Tracy Patterson, recapping leadership from the CCL perspective

This definition provides the scaffolding for all CCL experiences that Fellows encounter. In advance of both the first and third Next Gen retreats, facilitated by CCL, the CCL team administered a battery of tests to Fellows (and in one case, Fellows and their Federation colleagues) to help them understand the individual capacities, challenges, and strengths that they might contribute to “effective leadership.” These tests included the following:

- **Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B):** This test measures Fellows’ needs and tendencies on three elements of interpersonal relationships— inclusion, control, and affection—to reveal how Fellows are most effective, productive, and creative in their work roles, particularly as a part of teams.
- **Change Style Indicator (CSI):** This assessment provides Fellows with some insight about their preference for managing situations that involve change.
- **Benchmark/360° Review:** Fellows are asked to assess themselves in their work role, and questionnaires are then administered to Fellows’ supervisors, other superiors, peers, and direct reports to develop a multi-perspective report of their strengths and challenges as leaders in the workplace.
- **Influence Style Indicator (ISI):** A test to understand Fellows’ preferences for how they positively influence the choices and behaviors of others.

Though Fellows are presented with other content, these tests and the theories supporting them constitute the core of CCL-facilitated Next Gen programming. Each assessment gives Fellows a different means for

understanding themselves in their interactions with others in a leadership capacity. In thinking through their own proclivities, Fellows are given the space to explore areas for personal growth. And in many cases, Fellows have been able to directly apply material from CCL to solve leadership challenges in their own work organizations.

I've used William Bridge's theory of change and transition [at work]. I brought that forward to our all-staff retreat to set the tone for the year to understand our strategic direction. ... I was able to take exactly that and say, "Look we're not through the endzone with this change." ... My colleagues ran with it, and we were able to facilitate a great processing with my staff. There are things like that [from CCL] that I can take, that are tangible and feel real ... the psychology and research is all there. —Erin (Fellow)³

A second major component of the work involves each Fellow being paired with a CCL executive coach for six months following the first CCL-facilitated retreat. Several Fellows described their relationships with CCL coaches as more akin to life coaching—focused broadly on improving relationships, their life satisfaction, etc. Perhaps this is why some Fellows expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of depth they felt in their relationship with CCL coaches. Working in the Jewish Federation system is distinct from other work in the Jewish communal world, let alone secular professional contexts. Though CCL staff were very open to learning more about Jewish communal work, they were not well-versed in this world. Without some fluency in the professional context, values, and language of Federations—the local dialect in which Fellows must express themselves—it seems that CCL coaches were not able to provide the sort of professional guidance that Fellows were hoping for.

The M² Approach: Learning an Educational Language

Blessed is the one who spoke, and the world came into being.

Elyse, an experienced Federation professional and alumna of M², asks Fellows to consider how this verse from the Jewish morning service prayer “*Barukh She’amar*” matters in the context of their roles as Next Gen Federation professionals. What does this mean? Who is “the one?” Elyse reads the quote once more, above the quiet murmurs of Fellows’ questions, before they break into pairs to share thoughts about how and why this utterance might resonate for them, and how this statement might speak to their Next Gen program learnings about leadership and experiential Jewish education and engagement.

When the Fellows return to share their reflections with the larger group, some ponder whether being “blessed” is a precursor or the result of being a leader, of being “the one who spoke.” Others draw

³ Pseudonyms have been used for excerpts from Next Gen Fellow and Mentor interviews to protect their confidentiality and ensure that they could speak candidly about their experiences and reflections on the program. Pseudonyms have not been used for program facilitators or leaders when speaking or presenting publicly.

connections between the statement and their prior day's session on productive conflict, noting that the Jewish community is enriched by dissent and the courage to articulate one's vision of the world out loud. Still others interpret this quote as a call for leadership from both themselves and their community members—in essence, we are all “the one.” All are called to inspire, engage, and push for positive change in the Jewish community, to create the world in which we want to live. We are all responsible.

Although they did not name it as such, through this brief exercise, the M² team led Fellows through a collective process of meaning making about Jewish leadership. Freely and organically, Fellows pieced together themes of Jewish values, community, and practices as they related to their lived experiences as Jewish professionals. Collective meaning making lies at the heart of M²'s programming for Next Gen Fellows. During their second retreat, M² facilitators guided Fellows through the process of *thickening values*, a way to unpack and think about why they do what they do as Jewish professionals. This is an aid for bringing different groups—community members that Fellows are trying to engage, colleagues, or supervisors—into productive alignment around shared values.

Similarly, *relational engagement*—a framework for interpersonal engagement that M² developed from an array of social-psychological theories—was presented to Fellows as a way to shine light on and foster more meaningful one-on-one interactions. The framework draws attention to three aspects of any interaction:

1) the ways in which a person brings their *character*, or authentic self, to the interaction (or not); 2) the relationship between the *self and the other*, or the extent to which each person is authentically present in the interaction; and 3) *thirdness*, the contexts and external factors that may impact the interaction, either positively or negatively.

Fellows found it more difficult to understand how they might apply this abstract framework than the concrete language and tools that CCL offered, but wading through this messy process to grapple with different systems of meaning and value is exactly what the M² facilitators intended for Fellows. Specifically, they aimed to shift Fellows from thinking about themselves only as Jewish engagers to thinking of themselves as Jewish educators. As facilitator Mollie Andron described it:

We're not really presenting a toolbox. It's not prescriptive. [Relational engagement is about] an awareness. Being able to name what happened. And from M²'s perspective, the relational encounter is always educative, and being Jewish, or in a Jewish context, you are a Jewish educator in those moments.

To support this vision of Fellows as educational leaders in the young adult Jewish education and engagement space, Fellows were paired with M² mentors for the six months following their second in-person retreat. All three mentors work in Jewish education, and two of the three are M² program alumni and Federation professionals; the third knows the Federation system well. These mentors intimately understand the joys and challenges of working in the Jewish community; they are able to provide a useful sounding board for their mentees to navigate professional challenges, map out and work on particular

goals, and also apply the Next Gen content they have learned to date.

[My M² mentor] lives and breathes M², and she also works at Federation, so she really understands where we're coming from. She struggles with the same struggles; we're in the same boat. —Erin (Fellow)

Through CCL we had executive coaches. That was a mismatch for me. [My] executive coach is used to working with people in corporate America. [My M² mentor] better understands the nuances of working in this community. ... We've already, in our first and second meeting, come up with ways to strengthen my supervisory abilities by reimagining my weekly supervision meetings with my employees. That is a common thread. —Rachel (Fellow)

The Task for JFNA: Becoming Multilingual

The CCL- and M²-facilitated elements of the Next Gen program allow Fellows to reflect on themselves and gain the means to express themselves individually as leaders and educators, but it is through the applied learning practicum and the cultivation of Fellow cohorts that the Next Gen Fellowship aspires to produce impacts beyond the individual level. These are the only Next Gen program elements designed and executed solely by JFNA, and the JFNA team's deep understanding of the Jewish Federation system and the work that the Fellows do is key to this role.

The applied learning practicum tasks Fellows with designing and implementing innovative engagement projects for Jewish young adults in their local communities. Fellows must identify a gap or opportunity in the local space of Next Gen Jewish engagement, and then develop and articulate their vision to address that gap or opportunity in a coherent and compelling grant application. They must then map out a plan to measure indicators of success and align key stakeholders with their vision. This is where “the rubber meets the road,” as Fellows draw on and apply their newly gained leadership and Jewish education skills, albeit in a safe and supported context. The JFNA team, led by Director Eva Stern, has pushed Fellows to sharpen their thinking about their projects. How, for example, could they achieve the greatest impact for the cost of their projects? Do they want to achieve broad or deep impact? What would their local community benefit from the most?

At the time of this writing, the second cohort of Next Gen Fellows is in the process of launching their applied practicum projects, and these vary significantly in scope and focus. Some Fellows are focused on developing young adult giving circles; others are coordinating young leadership boards to empower community members; still others are focused on generating low-barrier access points for new Jewish families with young children to stay Jewishly engaged.

While JFNA staff bring to this process a unique understanding of Federation culture and a broad perspective on the field, the collective knowledge and support of the cohort itself is just as important for Fellows' applied learning; this includes their collective experience and knowledge of Jewish millennials

as a demographic. Indeed, the connections that Fellows forge with one another provide access to a wealth of knowledge and experience about Next Gen engagement. In hearing how their peers engage local Next Gen communities, Fellows learn a great deal about Next Gen as a demographic and how to engage them: what has been particularly challenging in this work, what works well, and what doesn't work so well. Most importantly, Fellows gain access to a network of professional peers with similar experiences and roles, but who are from different communities. This allows them to candidly unpack the challenges they face in their own communities and Federations. They can brainstorm innovative ideas for Next Gen engagement, without having to navigate sensitive politics.

The most valuable part of the Fellowship is the safe space and the connections [I've made] with the other fellows. Just an hour ago, I had a call with [a Fellow] from [a different community who] gave me advice on a new [initiative] that I'm starting. And I'm talking with [a Next Gen alum] from the first cohort. In the last eight months, almost all of my new ideas have come from conversations with those in the fellowship. —Alex (Fellow)

Being able to air grievances, test out ideas, and brainstorm in a safe space with other cohort members and with JFNA staff is a fundamental benefit of the program, one that constitutes a powerful springboard for Next Gen Fellows as they build their careers. Even if Fellows' applied learning projects are not successful in the ways they envision, this exercise and the context in which it takes place gives them room to experiment with new modes of leadership and Jewish education in their communities. They gain an opportunity to build out connections and access moral support, information, and resources through their cohort. These are the ingredients that help establish a basis for the Fellows' continued leadership in the Federation system, both individually and as a network of professionals engaged in similar work.

Bringing It All Together: Beyond Speaking in Tongues

One of my assumptions is that this leadership development world lives by itself, and Jewish experiential education lives by itself. ... The power and onus is on [Next Gen] participants to bridge them and apply these mental shifts. ... Each component, workshop, and hour will speak differently to each of us and will be applied in a multitude of ways. —Amara (Fellow)

Although the applied learning practicum offers Fellows an opportunity to draw on both their CCL- and M²-derived learnings in practice, at no point do JFNA staff make explicit the ways in which Fellows could or should combine what they have learned about leadership from CCL or what they have learned about educational engagement from M². Trying to fuse two distinct languages would result in cacophony and confusion—speaking in tongues. That said, the first iteration of the Next Gen Federation Fellowship included an “integrator” role, staffed by an expert Jewish educator unaffiliated with any of the three organizations driving the program. The integrator was to help connect the dots between different program elements, specifically by making Jewish meaning out of CCL's leadership content.

Ultimately, the integrator role emerged as a failed experiment. Instead of merely pulling threads through existing programmatic content, the professional hired for the position introduced new content by weaving Jewish history into the CCL experience. This was overwhelming for Fellows, who were already navigating an immense amount of content, and the role was subsequently eliminated. With the removal of the integrator role, Fellows from the second cohort of Next Gen appear, however, to be making better sense of core program learnings on their own and express appreciation for the lack of explicit integration between the different elements of their experience. Despite initially feeling disjointed and overwhelming, the program structure may ultimately be pedagogically generative in at least three ways.

First, though they work in similar roles within the same system, Fellows are diverse in their personalities, needs, and professional experiences. Providing Fellows with a smorgasbord of content, tools, and experiences allows them to pick and choose aspects of the program that resonate best for them at any given moment. For some, one language may be more meaningful than another. Rachel, for example, shared that she “definitely gravitated more to the CCL content because they provided us with a lot of tangible resources to help us understand our ability as leaders.” Others saw great value in both the CCL and M² approaches, recognizing that each curriculum and set of experiences gave expression to different aspects of their roles and responsibilities as Federation professionals.

I guess there is a way in which my role is reflective of what we’re learning ... the management aspect of things—learning how to give feedback, be empathetic, work collaboratively while also inspiring [people] and striving for direction, alignment, and commitment—that’s one side of my job. The other side is [about creating] meaningful Jewish experiences. [The program is] divided how my job is divided, so that works well for me. —Janette (Fellow)

The combo of the two approaches—the hard and fast tools of CCL and the more cerebral, strategic, holistic approach of M²—has allowed me to be more deliberate but not robotic when talking to donors; colleagues, as well. That’s a good way they tie together—keeping things flexible. —Alex (Fellow)

A second benefit provided by the “bilingual” design of the Fellowship is that it puts Fellows in a position to make sense of the program’s value for themselves—in the context of their professional roles; their leadership styles; and the strengths, needs, and challenges of their communities. This openness constitutes an opportunity for Fellows to develop leadership skills in the Next Gen space. As Associate VP Rabbi David Kessel explains, one of the major shifts in the North American Jewish community in the last half century is that there are many more ways to make meaning as a Jew, an ethos which is embodied and enacted by millennials as a generation. “This is where the Federation needs to move and grow.” Just as Fellows must chart the course through challenges and opportunities without clear answers in their Federation leadership roles, so, too, the Next Gen program evades clear directives for Fellows about how to make sense of its component parts.

Finally, because the program is built around a cohort model, Fellows turn to each other to collectively make sense of their shared experiences. When repeated, this action sensitizes Fellows to the value of

tapping their social network for resources and support, and this constitutes additional preparation for professional leadership. When professionals climb ladders of leadership, at some point, there are no more mentors; this is where a network of professional peers becomes invaluable. In sharing professional experiences with one another, the second cohort of Next Gen Fellows have grown more confident in their roles and leadership and discovered valuable resources, information, and moral support for their professional endeavors.

It's a relief to be around people who understand, but it's also good thought partnership. In our group chat, I asked which of [the Fellows'] communities have a Young Families division as part of a Young Leadership division [like we do], and I connected my associates with them [to learn more]. I also have a group chat with three people from [that same community], where we can vent about superiors or associates, or [where I can] share that I closed a \$10,000 gift. —Janette (Fellow)

The relationships with my co-Fellows, it's not just therapeutic to know others are going through things. My Federation is in turmoil. ... But other people have told me they've weathered storms or are doing it now. The various challenges that I've had with donors—in my last career [these things] might have made me think I was about to get fired. Being able to put that into perspective and see that's the way things go and not be freaked out over everything that goes wrong has allowed me to be at ease in my job—this is necessary for building relationships. —Alex (Fellow)

In short, despite the absence of dedicated efforts by program staff to articulate an overarching theoretical framework for the program, Fellows combine and make sense of disparate program elements in ways that makes the most sense for them, their dispositions, and their professional contexts. Having Fellows wade through the process of drawing connections and making meaning of the different programmatic lenses they encounter in Next Gen is in itself a valuable experience that builds their capacity to communicate in multiple languages and prepares them to better navigate the challenges and opportunities of working in the Jewish Federation system.

“So Many Layers”

The experiences [I have had in the program] are so meta, and there are so many layers that is hard for me to grasp. Perhaps [I'm] not understanding what this is for, or what is wanted from us, because this [experience] is hitting so many layers of my personal life, my work life, me as an educator, as a colleague that works in Federation, as a Jewish person in the field. ... [But it really is so] valuable and wonderful to have each of these experiences meshed in different ways and applied so differently. —Amara (Fellow)

[The biggest challenge in the program is the] disjointedness in its presentation. ... As educators, it is destabilizing [to observe]. But for the Fellows, it's presenting a broader array of possibilities ... they're not having as much of a problem with it as I am. I think it would be stronger if the ideological mergers were more intentional ... but I'm not sure I've seen much of a downside. —Leor (Mentor)

The Next Gen Jewish Federation Fellowship brings together three organizational partners—M², CCL, and JFNA—to develop the leadership and resource networks of Federation professionals so they become ever more capable, confident, and prepared to take on the challenge of engaging current and future generations of young people in Jewish life. This “Franken-fellowship,” as one facilitator described it, presents Fellows with a wide array of experiences and information, inviting them to pick, choose, and combine their learnings in a way that makes the most sense for them.

The Next Gen Fellowship is undoubtedly providing value for participating Fellows and the field. Yet there are notable challenges with this bilingual structure, as pointed out by the mentor above. This begs several questions about the value of different approaches to leadership and educator development for Jewish professionals:

- How compatible are the languages of Jewish education and Jewish leadership, and can they be learned in tandem?
- For programs with complex structures, what are the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of identifying throughlines for participants, versus allowing them to make meaning of disparate experiences themselves?
- What challenges and opportunities emerge during the development and implementation of integrated versus non-integrated programs?

Without a comparative case (or set of cases), it is difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that by asking Fellows to learn “from *different* points of view and ... to look at things with complexity,” the JFNA Next Gen Jewish Federation Fellowship invites Fellows to reflect on how they can be their authentic selves as leaders, in all their complexity. And who else should lead the next generation of Jews into the future, but whole, complex leaders who are equipped to engage others in meaningful Jewish life through the different languages of leadership and education?

Appendix

JFNA's Next Gen Fellowship - Cohort 2 Program Structure

