

# UPDATING THE BOARD-EXECUTIVE RELATIONSHIP

## Linking Theory with Practice

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*This article presents a new model of board-executive relationships derived from both practice and the recent literature. The organizing concept of this new model is no longer a partnership but rather a relationship of colleagues. It places the sense of executive vulnerability and fear emerging from recent executive-board relationships within the larger context of relationship building.*

Changes in the American Jewish community over the last several years have placed substantial stresses and strains on the traditional operations of Jewish communal agencies. The inexorable geographic dispersion of Jewish populations, profound demographic changes reflected in the numbers of intermarried families counted in population studies, the lessening of growth in annual umbrella campaigns, and the concomitant rise in supplementary fund raising by every worthwhile organization and agency have challenged the community organization structure that has served American Jews so well for decades. And, in the last few years, the enormous increase in the caseloads of Jewish social service agencies created by incoming emigres and by the numbers of formerly middle-income Jewish families dislocated by the persistent North American recession has taken its toll on the structure and operation of the Jewish communal system as it has developed over 40 years.

In fact, the depth, duration, and pervasiveness of the recession, coupled with the unprecedented movement of Jews from lands of oppression to places of freedom and the special fund raising this has required, have clearly accelerated the erosion of the traditional ability of the regular federation campaign to meet the majority of communally determined needs in communities. The resulting gaps have caused anger,

friction, and new tensions in communities between funders and beneficiaries, putting pressure on funder boards to retool to become more effective.

Taken together, these cultural, demographic, and economic strains have created substantial cracks in organizational life and have introduced a new kind of complexity to the executive's role. In this context, it is timely to re-examine the role of the executive in leading nonprofit agencies and to suggest updating the role and practice. From this examination, a new model of executive-board function will emerge.

### THE EMERGING SITUATION: 1985 TO THE PRESENT

Since 1985, the number of nonprofit executive firings, early retirements, and "voluntary" resignations — sometimes under dubious circumstances — has increased steadily. As a result many executives and subexecutives are expressing feelings of constant anxiety and jeopardy at national meetings. Hallway discussions at these meetings often suggest that lay leaders are becoming more demanding and less forgiving and that there is a perceptible distinction between experienced, veteran lay leadership and the new lay leadership. The veterans, being of the generation of the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, bring to the board room an emotional commitment that transcends all is-

sues on the table. The emerging leaders, who increasingly are of the generation of the civil rights and anti-war movements, by nature ask critical questions of authority and institutions and have a belief that our communal institutions must be up to more sophisticated challenges.

Lay leaders who are also business leaders seek more than a replay of their 9-to-5 weekday worlds during their volunteer service, and so it becomes increasingly important for the executive and the organization he or she serves to infuse the work these volunteers do with challenge and meaning. In contrast, executives increasingly talk about the need for time-limited tenure and early retirement and the difficulty of coping with stress when there are few people with whom they can speak openly and honestly.

One colleague has observed that the term "baseball manager syndrome" best describes the phenomenon affecting all large non-profit systems, including our Jewish federation system. Noting that while leadership are increasingly willing to pay their senior staff and chief executives well, they have a concomitant expectation that we should each "produce a winning team or else!" despite the fact that performance assessments are ill-defined or nonexistent.

Many executives find themselves in situations in which assessment criteria shift depending on the governance style of lay leaders. As a result, some executives adopt increasingly defensive strategies to protect themselves by becoming more cautious and fiscally conservative, less creative, and less assertive in carrying out their managerial leadership responsibilities.

In a nonprofit organization, this type of bureaucratic executive style is dysfunctional. Organizations today need an ever-stronger sense of mission, increased risk-taking and community outreach, more investment in team building, greater mobilization of political support, and increased involvement with and sensitivity to their beneficiaries. The cautious, bottom-line style of executive leadership results in too much

attention to detail, too much preoccupation with finances rather than with services, too much isolation from constituencies, and too much concern with means, rather than ends. Such an executive style can create leadership vacuums that board leaders may rush in to fill. Hence, the high potential for conflict between boards and executives (Professor Yeheskel Hasenfeld, personal communication, 1993).

There are often strongly held differences of opinion or conviction between lay leadership and executives and a tendency to politicize communal debate by politically astute lay presidents. Thus, some boards or executive committees and astute lay leaders develop political alliances to determine decisions — often without regard to underlying Jewish values or communal traditions. Sometimes this results in polarizing the decision-making process and forcing the executive to choose between his or her values and desire to survive in place.

Lately, increased general media attention to the costs of nonprofit organization operations and a particular focus on well-paid senior executives have added a new complication to the dynamic relationship between boards and their executives. Board leaders are increasingly called upon to justify expense levels and compensation packages for top management to the general public. This can cause discomfort to many volunteers who feel compelled to justify these expenses, but may not be able to produce performance criteria or objective reasons why a board compensation committee has determined that the executive's package is appropriate for the value the organization receives. The volunteer leader may then unwittingly turn that discomfort toward the executive, introducing a new tension into an otherwise excellent working relationship. When the executive experiences this new tension, questions of personal security and self-worth may arise and affect performance and job satisfaction.

Recently, in a very candid statement, one colleague noted the increasing brutality of

lay leadership in the way they deal with professionals and each other. Perhaps he was only summing up what had been building in the years between 1985 and 1993. He noted the increase in pursuit of personal agendas at the expense of communal agendas, in jealously guarding turf, and in not letting new people into communal decision making, even at the same time that the words "outreach" and "new blood" are the mantra of present leadership.

### **LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED**

Today there is great philanthropic competition, much broader assimilation that turns our most promising young people toward the American lowest common denominator, and many more varieties of Jewish lifestyles and of "opting out." The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey has shown that Jews in America are far more pluralistic, less identified with traditional Jewish values, more assimilated, and less committed to Israel and the truths of Jewish continuity that an earlier generation took for granted. Understandably, communal organizational boards, in an effort to encompass these diverse attitudes and backgrounds, have expanded in size. Federation boards echo these societal trends. As a result, they are less cohesive, lack consensus, share fewer common values, are less monolithic, and lack systemic socialization to community leadership.

In these tumultuous times, the nonprofit CEO must assume a new leadership role to aid the board to meet its challenge of repositioning the organization to respond to these diverse challenges. Effective university presidents play this role for the multifaceted schools they lead, articulating vision, direction, mission, and goals while serving as diplomat and goodwill ambassador to internal and external constituencies, as primary resource developer, and as top manager. Although increasing numbers of nonprofit organizations are embracing the necessity for change and are calling on their CEOs to start the process of transforming

the organization to meet the future boldly, many others are reacting to the challenges they face with anxious reaction, fiscal conservatism, and increased mismanagement. The organizations that hunker-down to wait for the storms to pass may not be here tomorrow.

Response to these challenges calls for effective professional leadership, but has the situation gotten out of hand? In all but a few cases, is the executive's ability to provide vision, leadership, and excellence in management thwarted by the environments in which we operate? Has the fallout from the Aramony crisis in United Way of America and the increasingly frequent, critical articles both in the philanthropic press and the general media created a fear reaction in executives that makes the assertion of leadership difficult if not impossible?

These questions, asked in meeting halls across the land, reflect an unfortunate dimension to current practice. Yet, more is demanded of professional leadership, who must find new ways of operating nonprofit organizations. We must learn from both practice and literature about how to lead effectively.

### **LEARNING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

The worn phrase, "it's lonely at the top," has been painfully clear to me over the years. Based on my executive experiences in Detroit, Los Angeles, and now in San Francisco, this section discusses the management of lay-professional relations and is organized into four components: (1) the changing role of the executives, (2) relations with senior staff in connection with lay leaders, (3) managing factions and building coalitions within the board, and (4) new approaches to cultivating effective lay leadership.

#### **The Changing Role of the Executive**

In the last decade, nonprofit executives have increasingly tried to mimic the model of the

corporate CEO. And yet, in the last few years, corporate boards, unhappy with stock performance and profitability, have been increasingly public with their criticism of their CEOs, and at some of the largest industrial concerns in the world, boards have recently fired their top executives. These CEOs saw themselves as corporate visionaries in residence and ambassadors to the worlds of Wall Street and government while someone else was responsible for internal operations. What is the lesson that we learn today from these corporate board room changes?

Today's nonprofit CEO has no choice but to remain hands-on with respect to internal operations. The lay leadership expects it. Although in larger nonprofit agencies, the executive must delegate much line responsibility and authority, the CEO knows that the board holds him or her finally responsible and accountable for operations. Thus, even when the CEO delegates, he or she must stay continuously informed and involved in any material decision making. The fiduciary responsibilities of our lay leadership have increased in recent years. Our lay leaders feel legally vulnerable if the executive is not fulfilling internal and external responsibilities competently, and there is less and less tolerance for error. This climate was exacerbated by the Aramony scandal during which lay leaders, including those in our systems, appropriately became impressed with the magnitude of their fiscal and legal responsibilities and began to act as they do in the corporate setting — if they're not protected by their executive, they must and will act quickly.

An increasing amount of stress-inducing behavior flows from powerful lay leaders to the executive. When these powerful individuals are successful in organizing factions within an executive committee or board, it charges every new policy change with a content that has little to do with the substance. When the partnership is not functioning at its best, power must be managed with great political skill.

The impact of such stressful behavior over time is highly debilitating and can lead an executive to ask such questions as "Why don't I like to go to work anymore?," "Do I need to get out of this field?," and "Am I losing myself and my cool?" In some especially difficult settings, colleagues report that although they were able to turn to some colleagues for support, they found themselves needing a management coach for personal counseling. What kept them going was the deep passion they felt for the Jewish community and a stubborn belief that they were making an important contribution despite the difficulties.

What nonprofit organizations require of executives is "the vision thing." Some inappropriate behavior by board members and boards is due to a lack of a clear direction. Absence of consensus on the agency's direction leads board members to try to micro-manage the organization.

The changing role of the executive today requires much greater attention to building relationships with board members and constituencies within our systems. This means regularly scheduling casual opportunities for private conversation with every member of the board, agency president and executive, and senior rabbis of all the large synagogues. Relationships are also developed by regularly speaking from synagogue pulpits, at agency board meetings and annual meetings, and at other appropriate conclaves and gatherings throughout the community. The goal is to convey the organization's vision and the executive's accessibility.

Regardless of community size, we are operating complex information networks in which, as William Avrunin said to me early in my tenure in Detroit, we eventually get paid not for what we do but for what we know. However, it is increasingly difficult, particularly in larger organizations, to have an open flow of information into the executive's office without emphasizing strategic constituent relationships.

### **Relations with Senior Staff in Connection with Lay Leaders**

The role of the senior management staff is critical, especially in large federations where they have a large number of relationships with board members and other constituents. I have worked in environments where staff members were mutually supportive and collegial, and I have worked where the senior staff have had turf issues, personal agendas, and significant jealousy. In the latter situation, instead of reinforcing the executive's vision and approach, they may be advancing their own ideas.

The executive will not be well served by the senior staff unless and until he or she deals forthrightly with such divisiveness. If, after candid assessment, it is concluded that senior staff are not functioning as a team, it must be determined whether a management consultation will improve teamwork or whether a change in staffing is necessary.

Senior staff need to be an executive's early alert to emerging problems, hurt feelings, or crises that need personal attention. If one's senior executives are not performing that role, then a problem is building because the factions within the board will take advantage of those disagreements and embroil the unwitting senior staff in their own political efforts. For these reasons, the effective executive must encourage an organizational culture that welcomes "managing up" by subordinates throughout the organization, thereby strengthening internal feedback. In so doing, the executive can infuse an organization with a new openness, esprit, and pride in teamwork.

### **Managing Factions and Building Coalitions within the Board**

With increasingly complex agendas and the growing vulnerability felt by volunteer leadership, which exacerbate the tensions that can exist between volunteers and professionals, it is useful to examine the power relationships within the board and to

identify strongly held differences of opinion on either current practice or policy matters.

A great deal of time is spent by executives and appropriate senior staff listening to the concerns or objections of board members to ideas emerging in committees that may signal a change in direction or policy and then lobbying those individuals either personally or through the appropriate officers or committee chair before board action is taken. Effective executives consciously delay consideration by the board of significant shifts in policy in order to ensure that education of the broadest number of leaders can take place. Similarly, an effective executive will invest him- or herself assertively to aid an agency or service facing difficulty that, to accomplish a major aspect of the organization's agenda, must be fortified if the community is to prosper. When encountering significant resistance, an effective executive will do his or her best to acknowledge the difference of opinion, as well as to identify the benefits to the community and to the organization itself of making these changes. One should avoid direct argument with those who feel so strongly. Sometimes, this entails encouraging lay leaders to speak with resistant members of the board, to persuade them of the merits of the proposal — without allowing the issue to be personalized in an exchange between the executive and this board member. And, an effective executive will work equally hard to create, if not a consensus, then a super majority.

Executives must mobilize legitimacy by continuously enabling the board to function as a policy-making body that sets broad, yet concrete and explicit policies that allow the organization to serve the community consistent with its values. And when the executive can demonstrate how the proposed implementation strategies fulfill the policies, his or her legitimacy is enhanced. Conversely, the failure to do so creates a vacuum into which board factions will march. To the extent that policies can have measurable results, the board can be held

accountable for its policies. A recent example is the process locally to establish a funded "emigre reserve" trust to provide a cushion against defaults by emigres in the CJF emigre loan guarantees program — a response necessitated by board member anxieties about future liabilities.

Differences of opinion must be heard and will be felt within the system, but the communal process need not halt simply because a few feel differently. Left unmanaged, the board discussion of such matters can become polarized and leave a very unpleasant residue, even if the majority vote for the proposal as it emerges from management through the committee process. One cannot afford too many sharp disagreements without a compromise of principles or losing one's job.

#### **New Approaches to Cultivating Effective Lay Leadership**

First, let us acknowledge that increasingly we are working shoulder to shoulder with our peers. The current generation of lay leaders have significant education and are concerned, as is the current generation of executives, with the quality of their own lives and often with compensation packages not too dissimilar to the current levels of nonprofit executive compensation. Many of our current lay leaders were not nurtured in our system in traditional ways. Increasingly, people emerge in the top federation leadership roles without having had the benefit of service in leading synagogues, one or more local agencies, or the campaign or of exposure to the national and international arena. Often, as competent as these individuals' leadership skills may be, the Judaic knowledge that a more richly experienced leader of the last generation brought to the table has to be developed on the job — which adds to an executive's individual burdens.

In working with board members and in identifying new leaders, we need to seek out lay leaders who represent and are natural leaders of constituencies and power bases in

the community. Executives need to learn to mobilize constituencies that support the vision and mission of the organization. This is the critical executive role in lay leadership development.

Given our increasingly complex agenda and the weaker emotional commitment and far more pragmatic approach of the younger generation of lay leaders, we need to actively identify the most promising lay leaders and *encourage* them to give service in traditional ways, though on a faster track. In San Francisco, a new advanced leadership training program has been developed that is designed to train promising board members for officerships and eventual chief volunteer leader roles in agencies and synagogues. Conducted like a graduate seminar, the program draws together top teaching resources to provide the selected participants with advanced knowledge of contemporary Jewish issues, some learning from traditional Jewish sources, and specific skills training for nonprofit board leadership, ranging from financial skills (such as budget development and monitoring) to effective meeting management.

Finally to the few who are likely to ascend to the top leadership roles of the federation, an effective executive will increasingly provide personal nurturing and education in what could be called a mentorship. Often, such individuals will not participate in a more structured leadership training program, so that the executive must be a teacher/tutor for the emerging lay leader. Those individuals should be encouraged to participate with the executive or other senior staff in appropriate local and national leadership discussions in which they can see that the local agency is part of a larger national and international system. They can learn about the issues and represent their own community's policy in these matters and gain a broader and richer perspective. These individuals can also see their executive operate with colleagues from other communities at national meetings as a coalition-builder.

The challenge for each professional is to recognize that, although the characteristics of the emerging leadership are different than their parent's generation, they bring significant knowledge, skills, and sophistication to our task. Our job then is to recognize the top leaders early enough and to provide very focused education on service themes, rationale for policy changes, and enduring Jewish values that enrich their perspective about the Jewish community's future.

### LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE LITERATURE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The literature on executive-board relations in the last 15 years places very heavy emphasis on power relationships, in contrast to the traditional shared role described as a "partnership." For example, as part of a literature review on executive-board relationships in nonprofit agencies, in 1985, Ralph Kramer described a "contingency model of board-executive relations." He found the concept of partnership too limited to describe the collaborations, disagreement, and dissent found in the board-executive relationship.

The executive's power stems from his or her status as a professional and the concomitant administrative authority and responsibilities that are embodied in the position. Power also derives from the working of the informal relations within the organizations and from his or her service as a full-time executive with a lifelong commitment to Jewish communal service. Continuity or duration of tenure increases one's influence, as does the size of the organization and size of the board. Kramer wrote that the executive has "maneuverability which comes from ambiguity," and the effective executive often must work with different factions of the board, which is rarely monolithic in larger nonprofit agencies. Complementing these characteristics is the reality that the boards tend to meet infrequently and that board members tend to give comparatively

little time to the task in contrast to ongoing professional management (Kramer, 1985).

The executive's use of power can be arranged on a continuum — authoritarian, leader, catalyst, supporter, enabler, interpreter, informant, submissive, and servant. These types of behaviors are described by Kramer in terms of the three dimensions of controlling, facilitating, or laissez-faire behavior (Kramer, 1985, p. 3). He noted that, by means of a careful facade and appropriate postures, a clever professional can maintain a democratic form while really running the organization. In this context, "board members and executives are conceived of as interest groups with distinctive resources to influence decision making and who, depending principally on the nature of the issue, may collaborate or engage in political maneuvering or conflict" (Kramer, 1985, p. 16). Kramer went on, "Under these conditions of disagreement, the executive's role is much less a partner or enabler and more a promoter or advocate trying to strengthen certain coalitions of board members and to weaken others who do not support his/her position" (Kramer, 1985, p. 28).

Kramer's review describes nonprofit governance models rife with conflict. Although such tension exists in some Jewish federations, it is the exception, not the rule. Nonetheless, Kramer's observations about the political skills the executive must employ are useful. Yet, there are more positive models.

Peter Drucker suggests that "nonprofits waste uncounted hours debating who is superior and who is subordinate — board or executive officer. The answer is that they must be colleagues. Each has a different part, but together they share the play. Their tasks are complementary" (Drucker, 1990, p. 10). "Colleague" implies a *mutually chosen* relationship.

No matter what conceptual model we employ, the term "colleague" is probably far more descriptive of the relationships that we should strive for than the term "partnership." During the CJF Commission on Per-

sonnel deliberations some years ago, a prominent volunteer leader gave a paper in which she stated that if the lay-professional relationship is that of partnership, professionals should be assured that the lay leaders are the general partners who are able to fire or buy out the limited partner (the professional executive) at will.

Recent analyses of changing nonprofit governance focus on the effective mutual interaction of executive and board. Interestingly, many of the nonprofit boards studied, with 20 or fewer members, are much smaller than Jewish federation boards, which today routinely have more than 50 members (with many having more than 100 and a few with over 200 members!). Therefore, some of the researchers' advice seems impossible to apply to broadly composed and large community boards, e.g., the CEO should meet *regularly* with *every* member of the board and sound each out (diagnostically) about board performance (Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Herman & VanTil, 1989).

Herman and Heimovics have conceptualized the following model of an optimally functioning board and the essential characteristics of the nonprofit CEO in this new environment:

The prescriptive (or practical) implications of the emerging alternative model start with the same legal reality as the traditional managed systems model: The nonprofit board is ultimately legally responsible. The moral assumption that a board will conduct the affairs of the organization as a public steward is also retained as an ideal, but there is no assumption that this will usually happen. Rather, we assert that such public stewardship is much more likely to occur if, and only if, the chief executive helps the board to understand and carry out this responsibility as well as its legal responsibility....The alternative model recognizes that boards are most likely to meet these responsibilities only if the board and chief executive share leadership (Herman & Heimovics, 1991, pp. 57-58).

The complexities of the myriad challenges that the modern nonprofit organization faces make it no longer possible to neatly define the board role as policy making and the executive/staff role as implementation. In this new model, the executive has increased responsibility to enable the board to function properly:

The effective chief executive typically plays a central role in sensing the changing external environment and in developing and implementing, through the board, strategic responses to the external environment and adaptations in the internal operations of the organization. Many factors operate in an organization's environment and give rise to different ideas about how to deal with problems facing the organization. Board members have differing access to the environment and differing ideas and information about what the major issues are that face the organization. The executive is in a position to serve as the integrator and processor of these ideas and information (Herman & Heimovics, 1991, p. 69).

Today's nonprofit organization, with its diverse public, fee, and philanthropic revenue streams, is highly information-sensitive. Decision making in multifaceted communal organizations must continuously incorporate fast-paced changes in the environment and the need to continuously adjust the organization to respond to change. The smooth collaboration of board and the CEO/staff team is therefore necessary for effective nonprofit performance.

Carver has noted that the CEO is key to the operation of this new board-executive model:

More than a mere coordinator, a CEO is accountable for all the parts coming together in an acceptable whole. The board is therefore able to govern by dealing conceptually only with the whole and personally only with the CEO. The CEO becomes the board's bridge to the staff, a role more distinct than merely



lead staff member. A powerfully designed CEO position is a key to board excellence. It enables a board to avoid the intricacies and short-term focus of staff management and to work exclusively on the holistic long-term focus of governance....If a strong executive causes a board to be weak or if a strong board causes an executive to be weak, the role has been ill-designed (Carver, 1990, p. 110).

Perhaps the first arena for reconceptualizing the executive relationship is the performance review process that the board conducts with the executive. Performance review requires some objective accountability measures. In a complex organization, broad standards may be most appropriate. The CEO is accountable for the whole organization working up to expectations. Thus, the board must be clear in its organizational expectations and must measure executive performance in relationship to overall organization performance. Carver states, "Because of its summative nature, a list of CEO job contributions (not of job activities) is the simplest in an organization. The chief executive officer is accountable to the board of directors for (1) achievement of Ends policies, and (2) non-violation of Executive Limitations Policies" (Carver, 1990, p. 117).

Carver simplifies the process of CEO evaluation even more by noting that

The CEO's only job is to make everything come out right!...Organization performance and CEO performance are the same. Evaluation of one is evaluation of the other. Accountability is gravely damaged when the two are viewed differently....The only relevant questions are: What did we charge the CEO to accomplish? What did we prohibit him or her from doing? How did he or she do against only those criteria? (Carver, 1990, pp. 124-125).

The increasing complexity of issues confronting nonprofit agencies and the increased information sensitivity required to

maintain organizational effectiveness together require the updating of the organization's systems of governance and management. New models of board-executive relationships are required in which boards and executives collaborate to enable organizations to succeed. New theoretical models must be introduced to organizations already in operation.

## SUMMARY

This article seeks to place the sense of executive vulnerability and fear emerging from executive-board relations within a larger context of relationship building.

In reviewing recent practice experience, four aspects of governance and management were analyzed: the changing role of the executive from lead professional staffer to leader-manager, the crucial importance of senior management staff functioning as a team, the importance of recognizing factions and building coalitions with constituencies represented in the governance system, and the importance of cultivating and training effective new lay leadership.

Recent nonprofit management literature was reviewed and its insights examined for applicability. These critical insights include recognizing and working with power relationships, striving for more collegial relationships between board and executive, helping the board recognize the complexity of managing today's multifaceted nonprofit organization, updating the executive's role to assist the board in fulfilling its responsibilities most effectively, and updating the governance of nonprofit organizations to enable these new roles to be acted out effectively.

The pace of change places a great responsibility on the nonprofit executive to lend vision and to give leadership to that process. The executive's leadership responsibilities are the critical ingredient needed to enable Jewish nonprofit organizations to move from outdated models reacting ineffectively to yesterday's challenges to organizations that earn support in the community

precisely because their vision and style of operation give leadership to foreseeing and dealing with tomorrow's challenges.

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