

MANAGING NEW TRENDS IN CENTER-FEDERATION RELATIONS—FURTHER COMMENT

STEVEN E. GELFAND

Assistant Director, Atlanta Jewish Federation

Centers and Federations need to relate to each other on short and long term bases, operationally and strategically, but a set of principles must be based on local circumstances.

Barry Shrage and Steve Hoffman offered a thoughtful and well reasoned analysis, from a Federation perspective, of Aizenberg's and Rosen's comments on Center-Federation relations.¹ The points made by Shrage and Hoffman provide an excellent basis for community dialogue. It will be difficult, however, for Centers to implement successfully the business-like strategies they mentioned if the Center movement in general and local agencies in particular do not first examine their mission or the role they want to play in the Jewish community. Further, lack of an articulated and widely understood vision of the Center's role will probably hinder better relationships between Centers and Federations.

A WELL ARTICULATED MISSION

Centers have developed into complex human service organizations that offer a wide range of increasingly sophisticated services to more members of the Jewish community than the original group work agencies that offered Jewish youth a place to meet. Many Centers offer a full range of social welfare, recreational, cultural, and educational programs beginning with day care for pre-schoolers and ending with day care for the elderly. Has this change in the Center's scope and complexity of

function been planned based on the studied role of the Center in the community, or has it come about because of an increase in advocacy on behalf of unmet needs and the historic availability of money to meet those needs?

The implication is not that the Center does no planning, but that there are different types of planning, not all of which are done by Centers. Traditionally, social service agencies have planned programs. Similarly, Federations have planned for the community—identifying unmet needs, working with beneficiary agencies to provide programmatic responses, coordinating and evaluating programs, and so on. Few agencies, or Federations for that matter, do organizational planning, one variation of which is strategic planning.

Most organizations review their policies and structure periodically but very few perform strategic planning. It is a process that begins with an evaluation of the organization's current mission and the purpose for its existence, and confirms that mission or develops a revised one in light of demographic and environmental trends and local conditions. Strategies are then developed which are derived from the mission and which are consistent with the environmental analysis.

Is it possible that conditions are such in some communities that Centers can no longer competitively provide such a wide range of services, can no longer effectively serve all age groups, can no longer efficiently operate physical facilities of 100,000 square feet? It is possible, and

1. "Managing New Trends in Center-Federation Relations—A Center Perspective," with following Comments, this *Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (1986), pp. 335-351.

perhaps likely, that the mission of today's Center—usually implicit rather than articulated and which is used to drive the organization—may be outdated.

Before Centers or any direct service agencies can make the kinds of strategic changes discussed by Shrage and Hoffman, they should have a well conceived statement of their purpose from which the strategies derive. Without an examination of a Center's role in a specific community, the most well conceived strategy may fail. Sophisticated health clubs, cultural arts programs, up-scale day care programs, and the like, that are designed to be profitable, will fail if the local target market isn't interested in the services. An analysis of an organization's purpose and the local environment will lead to the avoidance of such mistakes.

Strategic planning need not be a blue sky, cerebral effort that bears no fruit. Neither does it have to be a cold blooded process removed from Jewish values. The Jewish Home in Atlanta, for example, recently completed a strategic plan with assistance from Federation staff and is well on its way to developing action plans. Centers are no less able to accomplish the same thing, but Federations will have to encourage them to avoid being consumed by operations.

BEING CONSUMED BY OPERATIONS

It's not surprising that Aizenberg's and Rosen's statement of relationship focuses on operational issues. Many direct service agencies, especially Centers, face a variety of serious problems:

1. Operational expenses are increasing at a faster rate than the increases in Federation and United Way allocations.
2. Maintenance and repair of plant and equipment are increasingly expensive and often take resources away from program.
3. Third party revenue is drying up.
4. Multiple appeals are proliferating

more than ever while major donors are screaming for relief.

5. Agencies are competing not only for financial resources but for quality volunteers, professionals, and support staff.

6. Profit-making organizations offer attractive alternatives to people capable of paying market rate fees.

Quite often, agency executive and lay leadership spend inordinate amounts of time moving from crisis to crisis. When short term problems inundate an agency, it is very difficult to address mid- and long-range problems. Exacerbating an already difficult situation is the relative paucity of Jewish professionals who have been trained to deal with the variety or complexity of the problems they face.

There is little doubt about the value of the Masters in Social Work degree for Jewish communal service, but there is no reason to expect social workers to solve complex organizational problems or to hire the talent when funds are not available. Similarly, the average social worker has not been trained to think about solving problems in a marketing context as suggested by Shrage and Hoffman. For the Center-Federation relationship to be strengthened, we must be realistic about what can be accomplished.

NEXT STEPS

Centers and Federations need to relate to each other on short and long term bases, operationally and strategically, but a set of principles must be based on local circumstances. If JWB and CJF can identify the issues which affect all communities, then local agencies can tailor make the principles of a relationship.

National agencies can also help clarify the role of the Center movement. With a well reasoned analysis of the Center's role produced by JWB, as well as some ideal models, local agencies would find it easier to address their local mission and develop

new strategies. Perhaps a pilot effort could be attempted by JWB in a local community and a process handbook could be developed.

Change can work from the bottom up as well. If a Center recognizes the need for strategic planning—assuming that time is made for it—and the expertise is available on the Federation staff, a

strategic planning effort could be implemented. The Jewish Home's experience in Atlanta, mentioned above, is an excellent example.

Regardless of the specific steps that are taken in the future, professionals should continue the dialogue, as begun in pages of this *Journal* and beyond.



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO IN THIS JOURNAL

All of the factors I have talked about thus far have made it difficult for us to present a clear image even to ourselves, let alone to the public. We are Jewish but we are not a synagogue. We teach but we are not a school. We serve the middle class so we are not a welfare institution. All of this has produced confusion among ourselves about the nature of social work practice in the center. I am beginning to believe, although I confess I am not at all sure how we should best do it, that we need to establish, or re-establish if you will, the identity of the center as a social welfare institution concerned with the current problems of the Jewish people. We need to do this aggressively by our contacts with the fabric of the social work community, by involvement of lay people in the total matrix of the social work scene, and by any other means that you can suggest.

Bertram H. Gold
Winter 1961