

# VOLUNTEER-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS: A VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES\*

LOUISE B. GREILSHEIMER

*Vice President for Agency and External Relations, UJA-Federation of New York*

*The old volunteer-professional relationship, in which volunteer leaders set policy that professionals then implemented, is no longer as effective. Today's challenges demand that volunteers and professionals act as co-equal partners. An increasing number of volunteer leaders are moving to the other side of the relationship and assuming professional positions.*

The volunteer-professional relationship in Jewish nonprofit organizations has changed significantly in recent years. Two separate and co-equal roles have evolved side by side to govern and manage these organizations: knowledgeable, enthusiastic leaders who serve voluntarily and intelligent, dedicated, talented staff executives who are compensated. Since many of the same qualities are required for success in both segments of the organization, men and women are now able to move from one side to the other—a trend that bodes well for the future of the Jewish community.

In previous generations, there was a clear-cut distinction between the roles occupied by volunteers and professionals. The uncompensated lay leadership of Jewish federations, community centers, and other organizations had the unquestioned responsibility for establishing the policies that guided the paid staff members in their work. The staff, in turn, implemented those policies without much input into their creation and development.

Today, with the huge growth in the size and scope of nonprofit organizations, the gap between these roles has been sharply narrowed, if not eliminated. Board members do not simply thrust forward their ideas to be carried out by others, but instead develop

new policies in consultation and conjunction with the professionals of their organization. And professionals are intimately concerned with the initiation of agency policies, as well as their implementation. The enormous expansion of the Jewish communal infrastructure—federations, hospitals, community centers, schools, and other institutions—is testimony to the effectiveness of this broad-based lay-professional partnership.

Of course, the volunteer leadership retains the ultimate legal, ethical, and fiscal right to manage any non-profit organization. Professionals still have the task of keeping board members informed about current matters of interest and the consequences of various policy decisions. However, there is no longer an “us” versus “them” attitude. Just as in corporations, operational transparency at nonprofits has become essential. Strategic thinking as a team has replaced seat-of-the-pants decision-making by individuals. Volunteers and the senior executive staff are now in constant touch via e-mail and telephone, in addition to regularly scheduled meetings, to iron out difficulties and build a consensus.

Because the issues involved are so complicated and diverse, this new face of Jewish organizational structure did not appear without years of discussion and debate.

*\*This article is dedicated to Stephen D. Solender in appreciation of the many years he focused on the role of the volunteer-professional relationship. My four years as president-elect and president of UJA-Federation of New York as his partner gave me many insights to the nuances of that relationship. The time and energy that went into that partner-balance are a credit to his dedication.*

## **AN EVOLVING LAY-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP**

When nonprofit organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish, began to develop in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the volunteers were “ladies bountiful”—wealthy women who felt that it was their duty to help those in the community who were less fortunate. Families would pass on this obligation from generation to generation, with leaders from the same social set meeting to create and plan new activities for nonprofit organizations amidst an atmosphere of *noblesse oblige*.

The impressive work begun by these early volunteers who gave time and money for the benefit of numerous charitable organizations led to the concept of a lay leadership with the ultimate responsibility for a group’s continuance and strength. The secular world took the word “lay” from the organizational structure of the Catholic Church, a religion that had at its heart two co-existing arms: priests, who were endowed with sacred powers to administer religious rights, and the laity, who were ordinary members of the community and played an active role in its affairs.

The professionals who worked at nonprofits in their early days were also a different breed. For the most part, they were clearly subordinate to the volunteers and willingly accepted whatever tasks they were assigned, from preparing materials for board meetings to serving tea when requested to do so. They understood that they were required to meet the board’s expectations and to sublimate their own egos as necessary. They were “secretaries” hired to manage routine and detail work for a superior; the title of executive secretary is derived from that era.

During the last 25 to 50 years, a new type of volunteer leadership, both male and female, has emerged that holds little or no resemblance to their predecessors. High-powered lawyers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and others with an extensive educational background, a firm place in the business world, and a solid understanding of Jewish values took over the top leadership positions

at Jewish nonprofit organizations. Jews, no longer denied access to board membership at the nation’s leading cultural, educational, and medical institutions, nevertheless continued serving as lay leaders of Jewish philanthropies as well. (For some, their personal objectives, which at one time may have been only the accumulation of wealth and authority, have veered toward service to the community.) In fact, the chairmanship or presidency of one of these philanthropies—usually attained after many years of traditional board membership—often confers greater status, prestige, and visibility on the recipients than they would otherwise achieve in their regular business lives.

Similarly, the professional staffs at Jewish organizations are now better educated and trained to handle the complexities of establishing and running large human service agencies. Today’s professionals, especially those at the most senior levels, possess a plethora of sophisticated management, fundraising, and communications skills. Because of their comprehensive knowledge of their particular organization and the field in which it functions, they play an essential part in Jewish life today. They are also experts at preparing policy options and issue alternatives for board discussions. Many of these professionals have essentially the same qualifications as the volunteers on the board and bear the title of chief executive officer or chief operating officer—an indication of their value and importance to their organizations.

An example of the changing role of the professional is demonstrated by the transition 27 years ago from Steve Solender, who was the executive director of the Baltimore Federation, to Darryl Friedman, who was hired for the same position, but was called “President.” Darryl, with the blessing and support of his lay leadership, developed the role of Jewish fundraiser and community developer to become a major player in the community—to be in the same arena as the president of Johns Hopkins. He served on bank and foundation boards and was known as “Mr. Jewish Federation” in Baltimore

when Darryl Friedman resigned this past year it was a very important story in the secular press. This is a striking example of the evolution of the professional role in Jewish nonprofit life.

### A RELATIONSHIP OF EQUALS

The relationship between volunteers and professionals—the two centers of power in Jewish communal organizations—now operating on such a high plane, has become one of equals who share responsibilities, rather than that of superior and subordinate. Together they establish strategic direction and formulate goals. Their skill sets are similarly identical, as is their education, experience, and knowledge of Jewish affairs. Their ability to work together, therefore, is based primarily on their joint desire to care for those in need or to provide inspiration.

An aspect of this new relationship that has emerged recently is the crossover of executives from one role to the other. Some men

and women who formerly held high volunteer leadership posts have moved to the other side of the fence as ranking members of the professional staff. With each passing year, volunteers who are sensitive to organizational dynamics have become a more significant recruitment source for staff positions at Jewish nonprofits. I myself had the privilege of turning my avocation into my vocation by moving to the executive staff of UJA-Federation of New York several years after I completed my term as its president.

The current relationship of volunteer and professional is based on a sense of mutual trust, dedication, and commitment. With a singleness of purpose, each has won the confidence of the other through a balanced approach to the management of an organization. In the years ahead, this relationship will only grow stronger, along with the increased recognition by everyone that all of their ideas and actions should be guided principally, if not solely, by their desire to be of service to the Jewish community.

*"That man deserves the highest honors who does not ask for them,  
but performs worthy deeds." —Yiddish saying*

THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON  
is proud to honor

**Stephen D. Solender**

for his outstanding contributions to Jewish life

*His passion for repairing the world and compassion for those in need  
have made Jewish communities the world over stronger and more vibrant.*



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THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON  
6101 Montrose Road ■ Rockville, Maryland 20852-4816 ■ (301) 230-7200 ■ [www.jewishfedwash.org](http://www.jewishfedwash.org)

**STEPHEN D. SOLENDER**

*Steve, all of your friends and colleagues in Pittsburgh  
wish you well on this significant occasion.*

*Your career has taken you all over the world.*

*On each step, your compassion for those in need*

*Helped to build bridges with Jews everywhere.*

**Howard Rieger  
United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh**

**Congratulations to Stephen Solender for  
40 years of dedicated service  
to children and families  
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