BOARD RECRUITMENT AND THE REASONABLE EXPECTATION OF PERFORMANCE

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As the role of Jewish Family Service agencies has expanded, the role of lay leaders has not kept pace, and many lay leaders are unprepared to shoulder an additional share of the burden. Recruitment, orientation, and training need to be much more rigorous, and the culture of the Board should encourage a searching examination of all issues and forceful advocacy.

"Look to your left and look to your right. One of you will not be here in three years." With those comforting words, the Assistant Dean of the Georgetown University Law Center welcomed the Class of 1978. Those words could be said with equal force to most new Board members of social service agencies in 1997, and therein lies the rub.

Slightly over fifteen years ago I had my first contact with Jewish Family Service of New Haven: It was the day I was invited to join the Board. The sum and substance of my knowledge of the agency, its programs, and its policies was precisely zero. My qualifications consisted of being a "bright young lawyer" associated with a law firm headed by the husband of the immediate past president of the agency. I was, in short, as qualified to serve on the Joint Brazil/U.S. Defense Commission as I was to serve on the Board of Jewish Family Service of New Haven.

It is alleged that in the palmy days of yesteryear (defined as one year before the longest-serving member joined the Board), orientation to agency tasks was a good deal easier: The needs were quite concrete, and the basic requirements for Board membership were "a good heart" and a financial contribution. So long as the agency functioned primarily as the tangible manifestation of the community's charitable instinct, orientation could be given short shrift.

Now, mission confusion is the reigning principle. The concrete tasks are deemed "operations" and are said to be beyond the competence of the Board. About the only concrete task a Board is expected to deal with today is facing the stark reality of monetary shortfalls on an annual basis.

It also used to be said that "Three Ws" define what a Board member brings to a charitable organization—Wealth, Wisdom, and Work. To these may be added a fourth "W": Why? Why am I being asked to do this? Why am I supposed to care about this organization? And I would add a fifth "W": What? What am I supposed to do? What is my relationship with the agency's professional leadership supposed to be? What is my role?

Becoming a member of a Board ought to imply more than an agreement to lend one's name to a letterhead; it ought to imply some effort to make a significant contribution to the doings of the Board. However, in order to make that contribution there needs to be an initial imparting of the "corporate culture" to the new Board member—the provision of a meaningful road map that begins with the phrase, "You Are Here," and somewhere contains the phrase, "We Are Here; Where Do You Want to Be?"

Seldom in the history of the Jewish Family Service (JFS) movement in North America, a history that in many communities is over a century old, has the need for strong, effective lay leadership been as pressing as it is now. Putting lay leaders in a position to meet the many challenges posed by the current and reasonably foreseeable environment is one of the most important tasks any social service agency faces.

In today's climate of allocation slashing, JFS agency executives need lay leaders who are effective advocates. The professionals are

in the business of making sure that the policies are carried out by well-designed, well monitored, intelligently budgeted programs. It is the lay leaders who are supposed to craft that policy and who are charged by their organizational by-laws with oversight of the professionals to ensure that those policies are being furthered. They also need to be able to make the case for the agency in a multitude of settings at the drop of a hat. This includes dropping the hat themselves when necessary.

The environment in which JFS agencies operate is quite daunting. Government may appear hostile, federated leadership sometimes uninformed, and a great amount of agency work is done behind doors that must by their nature be firmly closed. The Jewish community-at-large values the work JFS performs, but its assessment of that value is all too often impossible to quantify. Asking the average member of the Jewish community why JFS is important is likely to elicit an answer of splendid vagueness.

BOARD RECRUITMENT

The root of the community's unfamiliarity with the services it provides is the way social service agencies (not just Jewish ones) recruit Board members. JFS organizations are at a disadvantage compared with other community organizations, such as Jewish Community Centers or Homes for the Aged. When the Center looks for Board members, it seeks people who have used, and are thus familiar with, Center programs. The same applies to Homes for the Aged, where children of residents form a pool from which Board members are often drawn. So too the day schools, where parents frequently find themselves tapped for Board responsibility. The service user comes to the Board of the service provider with an understanding of the road map's topography.

With the exception of those agencies that have strong adoption programs, this paradigm usually does not apply to JFS agencies. It is highly unlikely that JFSs comb their client lists for candidates for the Board. As a result, potential lay leaders of JFS organizations tend to come from the same pool of leaders from which the Federation and a host of other nonsectarian, nonprofit organizations draw.

Since prospective members of an agency Board tend to have limited familiarity with the agency, a rational first step in the orientation process would seem to be mission definition. First and foremost an agency must be able to explain its mission in terms that are succinct, coherent, and real. "Buy in" to the agency's mission has to be the core around which lay commitment to and involvement in the agency are based.

Yet, astonishingly, few social service agencies adequately perform this basic task. As a result, the immersion into a sea of detail by a new Board member is immediate. It is also disorienting, frustrating, and all too often counterproductive.

BOARD TRAINING

I am aware of no JFS agency that has sought or received professional assistance in the creation of materials or programs to orient new Board members to the agency, its mission, or its personnel. While it is not necessary for "Professional Explainers" to be summoned, establishing a clear sense of the agency's mission and of its existing programs in furtherance of that mission is of paramount importance.

All too often, over a tuna fish sandwich, a diet Coke, and a bag of potato chips, "key staff" and existing lay leadership are introduced, marketing materials and agency documents (by-laws and brochures, for example) are distributed, and in the course of an hour or so, "orientation" is achieved. It is little wonder that this all-too-brief orientation tends not to be particularly effective.

Professionally generated orientation materials would be of tremendous assistance in converting a new Board member's interest to commitment and commitment to involvement. And because the Boards of most nonprofit agencies are faced with the same challenges—seeking grant monies from local community foundations, in-kind assistance from educational institutions (schools of business are

particularly useful in this regard), and help from those few corporations that still purport to manifest "corporate conscience"—it may well be that the agency that generates the prototype orientation material will reap the greatest rewards.

The content of these professionally crafted orientation materials does not, of course, materialize out of thin air. The process of planning for meaningful orientation partakes in significant measure of the process of planning for the agency itself. It is impossible to orient effectively unless the object of that orientation is crystal clear. Examples of the questions that need to be addressed in orientation materials include

- What is the mission of the agency?
- How is that mission reevaluated, and how often?
- What are the policy considerations at play on any issue or series of issues?
- What role does professional staff play in the formulation of agency policy?
- Does any definition of the policy/operations distinction exist, and if so, how rigorously is it followed?
- How does the agency planning process operate?
- How is program effectiveness gauged?
- How are budgets prepared, refined, and examined?
- How is Board input obtained and processed?

THE IMPORTANCE OF LONG-RANGE PLANNING

All of these issues should, at least in theory, be discussed substantively as part of an ongoing agency planning process. But in many agencies, sitting Board members are as befogged about these issues as they are about differential calculus. Without a planning process that answers basic governance questions, formulaic answers having no basis in reality become the norm.

A serious long-range planning process, in which lay and professional leaders truly understand the agency and are forced to make meaningful policy determinations, has no rival. Achieving understanding takes years, "results" even longer. The minimum time line is about two years, which may well explain why long-range planning is out of fashion.

Clear, comprehensible orientation materials can also be of immense assistance in recruiting new lay Board members. A concise document that sets forth "This is what we do and this is what will be expected of you" can save endless difficulties later.

ROLE OF LAY AND PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

It is a bedrock principle that lay leadership has no constructive role to play in the day-to-day operations of a social service agency. It does, however, have a crucial role to play in setting agency policy and in insisting that such policy be carried out. In defining lay participation on a social service agency Board, the crucial question is, "What does the agency want?," which differs in significant respects from "What does the agency's professional leadership want?"

No one with even the slightest experience in social service agency governance can seriously argue that the line between policy and operations is a distinct one. Endless—and usually rancorous—arguments start with the phrase "That's my job, not yours," uttered in fact or in effect by Boards or executives. The problem is that the issue of "what's my job" and "what's your job" should be the second question, not the first.

The first question, made famous by Joan Rivers, should be, "Can we talk?" In a well-functioning agency, the answer to this question is always in the affirmative. There is no policy-related decision into which lay leadership does not have, at the very least, "input rights." By law, in most if not all states, the Board owns the agency and as such has the right, if not necessarily the obligation, to be heard on all issues. Where those input rights are asserted—at Board meetings, at committee meetings, by telephone calls or other informal means—is unique to each agency. But

they emphatically do exist, and they must be acknowledged as legitimate.

By the same token, operations-related decisions (for example, "Should Couple X or Couple Y be next in line on the adoptions list?" or "Should family therapy be tried in dealing with the particular problems of Child Z?") by their definition do not relate to policy issues, and thus Board input is not a right. An executive, at his or her discretion, may entertain comment on such issues in a private setting, but this is a matter of grace, not right.

The second question stated above involves issues of decision-making ability and responsibility. There is no hard-and-fast rule in this area. All that can be stated with confidence is that when Boards speak and professionals refuse to listen, the situation is as bad as when professionals simply do not wish to speak. If the underlying principle, which must be demonstrated and not merely spoken about, is that all players have the agency's best interest uppermost in their thoughts, then give-and-take over time will establish in broad form the lines of respective responsibility.

In other words, when lay and professional leaders treat one another like children, childishness is the inevitable result. The professional is entitled to know why a Board feels the way it does, so that he or she can either further its stated objectives properly or address its objections in a meaningful and effective form. Similarly, lay Boards need to know why an agency professional deems a discussion to be "out of bounds" or why a professional holds a particular view of a particular issue under discussion so that it may reach a better informed decision. Winston Churchill's advice remains sound: "Jaw-jaw is better than war-war."

The process of opening up discussion requires trust-building over an extended period of time, and here, too, the proper forum in which trust should be nurtured is the planning process, where issues can be viewed at an appropriate distance. Everyone involved in an agency needs the clarity that agreed-on role definitions can provide, for the friction that is inevitably generated otherwise is universally unhelpful to the agency, its lay leadership, the professionals they employ, and—lest we forget—the clients the agency serves.

A management audit can be invaluable in this regard. The results of that audit, a detailed description of roles and respective areas of authority, can help avoid problems and, should problems arise, serve as the consensus-based referent to solve them. Once such a detailed description of roles and authority is in place, monitoring can be accomplished through the ongoing planning process.

All of this is crucial in light of the environment in which today's social service agencies operate. There are too many dangers, too many sources from which sudden jolts may come, to assert that a job done well in the past will be recognized and rewarded now and in the future. A well-run, professionally managed agency is no insurance policy against a sudden cut in funds, a termination of a program by a specific funder, or a downturn in the Federation or United Way campaign that throws the agency into financial chaos and requires an immediate examination of first principles. Far better that those first principles be under constant re-examination.

Of particular interest is the fact that the Board is armed with legal authority to decide "decisional rights" issues. In the event that the consequences of a decision give rise to litigation, it is the corporate entity (and in most states, the individual Board members) that will be sued; the professional is going to be sued in part as an agent of the corporate parent. It is only fitting therefore that if the Board is going to bear legal responsibility for the consequences of an action, it must have the legal right to take that action. That the authority may be seldom exercised is irrelevant. Should Board-professional relations deteriorate to the point that a showdown over who has the right to make a decision is pressed, the professional, in the absence of contractual provisions to the contrary, loses one hundred times out of a hundred.

Thus, the issue of "decisional rights" is not, formally, an issue at all. Informally, however, it is quite another matter.

One unfortunate result of the wild swings in funding patterns over the last several years is that we have expected our agency professionals to do too much. It is not enough that the agency be run competently; our executives are expected to be grant cultivators, Board developers, event organizers, fund raisers, and budgetary wizards. We expect them to be able to zip off to the state capital on short notice to testify or to lobby. We expect them to spend a large amount of time cultivating the Federation or United Way, and to sit on committees, task forces and various ad hoc groups to "protect and advance" the agency's interests. The wonder is not that executives burn out at an alarming rate; the wonder is that there are any left at all who are not burned out. It is therefore no surprise that agency professionals feel that they erred in attending schools of social work; a masters degree in juggling would be more appropriate to the tasks we have carved out for them.

EFFECTIVE LAY LEADERSHIP

In part these high expectations can be traced to the transient nature of Board membership in many communities. When a pressing task comes to hand, such as having to sit on an emergency Federation Task Force established to figure out how to "equitably" spread a 25 percent funding cut in local programs across agencies, the number of lay people to whom the agency executive can turn to serve on such a Task Force is often somewhere between zero and one. If that lay leader even has the time to serve, does he or she have the expertise to advocate for the agency's clients, positions, and programs? Does he or she have the facts at hand to frame a position coherently and with flexibility? Does he or she have the clout to make those views actually heard? Is he or she able to build coalitions with other lay and professionals to best serve the agency's clients? If not, the favored alternative is to add one more item to the professional's already overloaded plate.

As the role of the agency has expanded to meet social service needs never anticipated just a decade or two ago, the role of lay leadership simply has not kept pace. Our lay leaders seem unable or unwilling to shoulder a significant share of the burden.

As a practical matter, lay leaders are often unprepared to shoulder an additional share of the burden. Effective advocacy requires an intimate knowledge of the things being advocated. We tend to set criteria for Board entry at a low level, and many social service agencies do not make knowledge acquisition a priority for Board members. We ask our lay leaders to be only minimally informed about agency operations. We can't ask our lay leaders to "run interference" for the agency in the community at large when we have not given them the factual background necessary for the task.

JFS agencies often serve as an entry point into Jewish communal leadership; in other words, we tend to take our Board members rather "green." A significant percentage serve ably and then disappear from the Jewish community's radar screen, remaining in contact with the agency only as annual donors. Service on a JFS Board can be a richly rewarding experience, but it can also be a full-body immersion in minutia, detail, and budgetary pettifogging if leadership (lay and professional) is weak. If the Board experience cannot be made meaningful, if our Board members cannot gain a significant sense of accomplishment and contribution, then the ability of JFS to create community leaders will be episodic at best. And when we fail to put people with a sure knowledge of the agency and its mission into leadership positions in the community, decisions about the agency's future will all too often be made by people who are ill informed about it, or worse, flatly antagonistic toward it. Leadership counts.

The related problems of knowledge and time are crucial. Since we tend to accept lay people on our Boards with minimal understanding of the agency, its mission, and its role in the community, the learning curve is considerable. My "time line" with the agency in New Haven in the early 1980s was atypical: I served on the Board for seven years before I became President. Most serve longer apprenticeships. And during those longer apprenticeships, the opportunities to become disengaged, frustrated, or bogged down multiply.

Lengthy terms of service prior to becoming an agency President do ensure that a potential leader is "seasoned," "patient," and "solid." It also serves to cultivate those with even temperament, diplomacy, and conciliation skills. Unfortunately, in the current environment, the skills that are needed are innovation, passion, boldness, and forceful advocacy. A leader either has those traits or he or she doesn't; service time is no substitute for them. Although there is something to be said for paying one's dues, it ought not be the touchstone for leadership that it is in many communities.

I have yet to find a JFS Board that did not have its fair share of dead weight—people with good hearts and a sincere desire to help the agency, but with little more to offer. In the days when the agency was responsible for little more than the administration of the Milk and Coal Fund, such people were an acceptable luxury. But in today's environment, that luxury is no longer acceptable. Such people may be wisely used as community representatives on agency committees, and some may serve as part of an Advisory Board, but everyone who deals with them knows that they are not candidates for agency leadership and never will be. Why are they still there?

Strong personalities (but not stubborn ones) make for strong Boards. They also make for fractiousness, heated meetings, and the sure knowledge that nothing, absolutely nothing, is going to get by them unchallenged. Such Boards are difficult to control. I have always asserted—and only half in jest—that a meeting that does not end with blood on the floor or finger marks on someone's throat is not a productive meeting.

Yet as unwieldy as such Boards may be, the unassailable fact is that they produce outputs that are well reasoned, defensible (by virtue of having been defended repeatedly), and the product of strongly held beliefs. They produce, in other words, positions worth fighting for.

And it is crystal clear that those positions are going to have to be fought for. It is not enough to gently plead with the community for the agency's voice to be heard; often that hearing comes only after the most vigorous advocacy and exercise of political skills. The people our agencies serve are often those without a voice or those who possess a voice the community may not wish to hear. Reminding the Federation, for example, of the existence of the Jewish homeless, Jewish alcoholics, Jewish drug users, Jewish compulsive gamblers, and Jewish spousal abusers, is to speak words the community would rather not hear. Gentility, although useful in the setting of hospital Boards or country club Board rooms, is no longer a benefit to a social service agency.

AN ACTIVE LAY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Board members cannot be faulted for their seeming inability at present to process information relevant to Board operations: They have a massive amount of data to deal with, and in the absence of an intellectual or practical framework in which to deal with it, the temptation to nit-pick is often irresistible. Since our agency Boards have not historically been "empowered," they have tended toward weakness. Professional leadership has not sought, and in large measure does not want, the responsibility of policy formulation and advocacy within the community, but those tasks have fallen to them largely by default. If they don't do it, no one else will, and the agency cannot survive unless it is done.

Our agencies must properly identify leaders, bring them along in the leadership structure, firmly acquaint them with agency operations and policy, and foster an environment in which searching examination of all issues is the norm rather than the exception,. Only then can lay leadership achieve full active partnership with professional leadership. Without such a partnership, our agencies will inevitably be faced with the sad realization that their best days are behind them. A sadder fate for the community and those served by our agencies cannot be imagined.