

# CENTERING ON PROFESSIONALS: A PLAN OF ACTION

STEVEN J. ROD

*Vice-President, Professional Development Services, Jewish Community Centers Association  
of North America, New York*

*A survey of JCC professionals reveals that they are generally highly satisfied in their jobs but express concerns about salaries, the availability of on-the-job training, recognition, and their opportunities for growth and advancement within their current agencies. This article describes the action steps to be taken by the Jewish Community Centers Association to address those concerns.*

**I**t is the best of times, it is the worst of times." Charles Dickens's immortal line comes to mind when reading "Centering on Professionals: The 2001 Study of JCC Personnel in North America." The survey, published in April 2002 by the Jewish Community Centers Association (JCCA), has served as a springboard for discussions among lay leadership and staff of the 275 JCCs and Ys throughout North America. The findings were both exhilarating and sobering, and so, indeed it is the best and worst of times!

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The survey provided us with extensive data regarding the overall satisfaction of JCC professionals. Here is a concise statement of six of the study's key findings.

1. JCC professionals are generally highly satisfied in their jobs, especially with respect to the intrinsic nature of their work. However, they express concerns about salaries, on-the-job training, recognition, and the opportunities for growth and advancement in their current agencies.
2. Staff turnover has slowed considerably since 1987, and job stability has increased commensurately. However, there is a higher turnover rate in three categories

of professionals: the recently hired, those who work in smaller JCCs, and non-Jews.

3. The vast majority of JCC professionals are Jewish, as they were in 1987. However, the number of Jews in the health and physical education area has declined, as well as in administration where new job titles have been added since 1987, such as chief financial officer, development director, and marketing director.
4. The Jewish staff exhibits high levels of Jewish identity, especially with respect to Israel and other aspects of Jewish ethnicity.
5. Salary increases in all job categories have equaled or surpassed inflation since 1987. However, salaries for entry-level staff are still quite low, trailing those of more senior professionals more than they did in 1987.
6. Women are heavily represented in lower-level and mid-management positions, and their proportions decline in the more senior ranks. However, the proportion of women has grown throughout the system, particularly in senior management and executive positions. Women's salaries significantly trail men's salaries in senior management and executive positions.

---

*Ed. Note:* Significant actions have been undertaken subsequent to the preparation of this article. However, the information contained therein remains correct and accurate.

The purpose of this article is to review the implications of the first finding above and to describe five steps that should be taken to address concerns expressed by JCC profes-

sionals. Further, this article demonstrates the practical applicability of the study findings by describing action steps and an action plan.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey was conducted by the Florence G. Heller—JCC Association Research Center (FGH-JCCARC) and made possible by a generous grant from the Florence G. Heller Trust. Judith Schor was the principal investigator along with Dr. Steven M. Cohen, the two staff people at the FGH-JCCARC.

Respondents completed an 11-page questionnaire containing approximately 175 questions. The instrument covered such matters as basic demographic characteristics, Jewish involvement and identity, professional commitment, and related matters. Construction of the questionnaire benefited from a focus group and five in-depth interviews with younger current and former JCC professionals.

The survey was mailed to close to 3,000 professionals working in JCCs in August, 2001, using the JCCA database of current professionals throughout the continental system of JCCs. Of the 2,989 JCC professionals in North America on this roster, 1,787, or 60 percent, returned usable questionnaires in response to two waves of questionnaires we mailed. The last completed questionnaire was received in January, 2002.

By the standards of survey research, a 60 percent response rate is very healthy, and even more impressive in light of the period in which the survey was primarily conducted. During much of the time the surveys were in the field, America was dealing with the tragedy that occurred on September 11. Following that catastrophe, America was caught in the grips of the anthrax-by-mail scare, a phenomenon that caused many mail recipients to open their letters with great care or to refrain from accepting mail from unknown sources.

The high rate of response reflects the commitment of JCC professionals to their field and their great interest in expressing

their views on their work and profession. It also reflects the application of proven techniques for maximizing participation in self-administered, mail-back, social scientific surveys. In all, there were six contacts with respondents: an introductory letter, two mailings of the questionnaire, and three reminders at various times.

The 1,787 questionnaires came from every JCC within JCCA. There was little variation in response rates by region, size of JCC, or gender. Men and women, professionals in different regions of the continent, and those working in JCCs of different sizes all responded with roughly equal frequency, so that the published study represents a microcosm of the universe known as JCC professionals.

It is the best of times: A remarkable 94 percent of all respondents told us that they were satisfied (or highly satisfied) with the day-to-day work they were doing with their members and clients and with their relations with their co-workers. In fact, more than half of the participants indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied on all but two items.

It is the worst of times: Just under half (47%) of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their opportunities for advancement, and only 40 percent indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current salary. In contrast, 39 percent indicated they were dissatisfied with their current salaries. This figure of 39 percent is the largest dissatisfaction number to be found throughout the 11-page questionnaire, with the next highest being 20 percent, and only eight cohorts throughout the survey had dissatisfaction numbers in the double digits. Most levels of dissatisfaction were in the range of 1–7 percent. That the response to satisfaction with current salary clearly leaps out as its own stand-alone category is itself the message. Dissatisfied people are found equally in every group of professionals surveyed, with the exception of JCC executives, all of whom expressed satisfaction with their salaries.

## FIVE EASY PIECES

The Personnel Study, as it is referred to, has become a major charge in carrying forth the day-to-day work of JCCA. Its data form the basis for a practical agenda for our JCCs, and a work plan has been derived from those cohorts that yielded double-digit rates of dissatisfaction.

What follows is a five-step program for improving job satisfaction in a JCC or Jewish communal agency. It is based on an important premise: There is no need for any kind of professional staff retention plan in JCCs. There has been a plethora of talk about retention in our agencies, indeed on these very pages. I suggest that an internal examination of the JCC's professional personnel policies and practices is in order on a regular timely basis and that an assessment of the current status of these practices is what is needed to ensure that the agency is able to retain its key staff. The Personnel Study has yielded the data to enable us to focus on the five areas that require the most attention.

The higher the level of practice and observance of these areas in your agency, the more animated the staff members' response will be to your efforts.

### Supervision

**Finding:** 14 percent of the respondents noted dissatisfaction with their quality of supervision.

**Commentary:** The word "supervision" connotes and denotes different things for different generations of Jewish communal workers. For several decades, quality supervision was the hallmark of most JCCs. It was taught in graduate schools of social work and practiced at every level of the JCC and in most Jewish communal organizations. With the decline in the number of professionals with formal education and training in supervision, more and more of our colleagues come to their positions without any frame of reference regarding satisfactory supervision. The study data and anecdotal supporting evidence direct us to help our JCCs improve the current status of supervision.

For the purposes of upgrading supervision, I define supervision as a process that consists of a variety of patterns of behavior, the appropriateness of which depends upon the needs, competencies, expectations, and philosophies of the supervisor and the supervisee and the specifics of the situation (task, client, setting, and other variables). The goals of the supervisory process are the professional growth and development of the supervisee and the supervisor, which it is assumed will result ultimately in optimal service to clients.

**Taking Action:** The JCC as a workplace can be greatly improved if we can find a way to help each JCC upgrade the level of supervision being practiced on it. We will be working on several levels to achieve this end. First, we will define the quantifiable gain, the direct benefits to the JCC, of integrating our supervision initiative into their daily operations. We will raise awareness that almost every JCC executive is aware of what great supervision is supposed to look like, but few actually deliver effective supervision throughout the agency. Good supervision falls prey to the pressures of the clock, the calendar, and the crisis-of-the-day at the JCC. We will develop and provide a turnkey program for JCCs to use for training and implementation of effective supervision at all levels.

### Staff Development and Training

**Finding:** 69 percent of the respondents said they were satisfied with the opportunities to grow and learn professionally, and 56 percent said they were satisfied with on-the-job training.

**Commentary:** In my travels to JCCs over the years, I have found the area of staff development and training to hold the most dissonance between perceived and actual reality. The *Standards for Jewish Community Centers* says in section 5.3: "The JCC offers an ongoing staff development and training program throughout the program year for its professional and support staff, focusing on the appropriate skill competencies." Some of

our JCCs have highly developed, carefully crafted year-round training programs, which some have dubbed "JCC University-JCC U." Yet, many do not. What I have recommended over the years is that time should be set aside in advance and blocked by all staff. Each spring, the JCC should announce to its staff, "Please remember when you are planning your programs for next fall and winter not to schedule yourself for any commitment on the third Thursday of the month from 9:45 until noon—this will be our 20-hour staff development program for you."

On a separate aspect of staff training, we believe the New Professional Orientation and Retention Institutes should be restored to the level of the mid-1990s when five three-day Institutes were offered in different regions every year. At the current time they are sporadically offered for about two, three, or four hours and are tied into Association of Jewish Center Professionals (AJCP) regional meetings. The JCCA should see these institutes as a key to retention.

**Taking Action:** A series of turnkey Training Session Curricula should be developed and provided by JCCA four times a year to its member JCCs. The curricula will be based on the learning needs analyses that we have conducted in the past and that are reflected somewhat in the Study. The key skills to be included will be skill development in supervision, working with volunteers/lay leaders, budget development, and the context for JCC work.

### Recognition for Your Work

**Finding:** While 64 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with the recognition for their work, 17 percent said they were dissatisfied. Anecdotally, we often hear from colleagues who feel their work goes unrecognized.

**Commentary:** This is another personnel area in which there is a disparity between perceived and actual reality. In an article in the Fall, 2002, issue of this *Journal*, David Edell said that he felt like screaming, "Just do it!," when it came to making sure we are

treating our professionals well.

**Taking Action:** We know from both the study and our work with JCCs that many staffs of JCCs do not feel valued or recognized. We need to create an initiative that will be both turnkey and locally creative with regard to providing resources for JCCs to overcome this deficiency.

### Number of Hours Expected to Work

**Finding:** 15 percent of JCC professionals reported they are dissatisfied with the number of hours they are expected to work, whereas only 9 percent reported dissatisfaction with the scheduling of hours they were expected to work.

**Commentary:** JCCs are businesses that, for the most part, are used by the vast majority of their customers at a time when most people are relaxing: early mornings, late afternoons, evenings, weekends, and holidays.

**Taking Action:** We need to raise the bar with regard to flexibility of work assignments and the workweek. While the vast majority of professionals felt satisfied in this arena, additional progress must be made.

### General Employee Benefits and Salaries

**Finding:** 18 percent expressed dissatisfaction with general employee benefits (e.g., health insurance, day care, etc.), and as noted only 40 percent expressed satisfaction with their current salaries.

**Commentary:** In recent years, JCCs have been forced to trim the size of their staff in very difficult economic times or have had to ask their employees to pay a higher percentage of the health insurance premium, which has increased 18 percent in just one year.

**Taking action:** In 2000, JCCA adopted a standard that challenged each JCC to set its entry-level salaries at the same level the local Board of Education compensates its entry-level teachers.

### CONCLUSION

We are just at the initial stages of analyzing and implementing the study's findings.

We will be reporting again in these pages on the progress we have made in elevating personnel practices. The truly good news is that the Personnel Study confirmed for us that the vast majority of the JCCs' 3,000 professionals come to work every day and perform their work with the highest degree of satisfaction.

### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Here are some useful resources to consult if you want help in taking some action in one or more of the areas discussed here.

#### Supervision

*Common-sense supervision: A handbook for success as a supervisor* by Roger Fulton (New York, Ten Speed Press, 1988).

The problem with books on supervision is that there are too many of them. I selected Fulton's book because it is concise and to the point (eight useful chapters), and it has wonderful appendices detailing 25 traits of a good supervisor and 25 traits of a poor supervisor. These two lists by themselves make for a great staff training seminar for your staff. In fact, a plan to upgrade your staff's performance can be extracted from the appendix on 25 traits. It's an elementary but useful book.

*The set-up-to-fail syndrome: How good managers cause great people to fail* by Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2002)

Manzoni and Barsoux look into the negative dynamics that define far too many relationships between bosses and the people who report to them. More importantly, it also proposes ways to attack the problem where it exists and to keep it from occurring elsewhere. Anecdotal evidence from new JCC professionals supports these observations and recommendations.

#### Staff Development and Training

*How to run seminars and workshops: Presentation skills for consultants, trainers,*

*and teachers* by Robert L. Jolles (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2000)

This is a complete guide to running training seminars and programs, based on the methods of the Xerox "Train the Trainer" program. Jolles shows you how to work with adult audiences and how to get your trainees involved in the learning process. The "how's" of doing this are critical, and here is a great resource for the "what."

#### *Crisp's fifty-minute series*

I would strongly recommend you go to CrispLearning.com and become familiar with their products. I particularly recommend their "Fifty-Minute Series," a series of several dozen titles on every imaginable staff training topic, with the exception of Talmud Torah. The topics cover everything from A-Z (Art of Communication, Attitude and Attacking Absenteeism to Wellness in the Workplace, Working in Teams, and Writing Effective Emails. For less than \$200, your JCC can purchase a library of titles that can be used to design training sessions for your staffs.

#### Recognition for Your Work

*1001 ways to reward employees* by Bob Nelson (New York: Workman Publishing, 1994)

While there are probably not more than 200 of these ideas that we can use in our day-to-day work, the book makes a simple point: It's so easy to be creative in the way we recognize our and reward our staff. I also like the fact that this book predates the Internet and yet still holds up as a very useful text!

*Love 'em or lose 'em—Getting good people to stay* by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002)

While the design of the book is a cutesy "A-Z" format (Ask, Buck, Careers...Yield, Zenith) the content is extremely helpful in challenging the reader to be sure we recognize those for whom we are responsible.