

Perspectives on Executive Function*

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I. Introduction

The receiving of the Ten Commandments represents perhaps the high point in Jewish history. The rabbis therefore were intrigued with the question as to why the Torah portion, in which the miracle at Sinai occurs, was named for Jethro. True enough, he was Moses' father-in-law, but he was also a non-Jew and therefore an unlikely candidate to have the privilege of his name being given so famous a portion of scriptures.

The answer the rabbis give is interesting. They point out that at the opening of that portion of the Torah reading, Jethro visits the Israelite camp and notes that Moses is bogged down with administering to the daily needs of the people in Israel. All day long, Moses sits in judgement and mediates the day-to-day squabbles that confront the people. Jethro recognizes that whereas Moses may have needed one kind of leadership style in leading the people from Egypt, times had indeed changed and another kind of leadership is required. His subsequent suggestion to set up a system of tribunals permitted Moses to delegate much of his day-to-day work and freed him to undertake the journey to Mt. Sinai.

Our Jewish community too, has undergone profound change. The implications of these changes for current and future executive leadership are equally profound. It was in fact the changed nature of the Jewish community center executive scene that gave impetus to this

paper. Just consider that two out of every three individuals who today occupy Jewish community center executive positions were not in those positions five years ago. Not only is this more than double the turnover rate of the previous five years, but it has affected the executive leadership of Centers of all sizes. The Metropolitan City Center Executives Seminar for example, which was for a long period the group with the smallest turnover, has in three years undergone a change in half the group.

Why this is so not only is historically instructive, but also has implications for executive practice now and the next five years. By 1984, we may have other concerns.

II. New Realities

There are four "new realities" which have emerged in the twelve years since the Six-Day War that affect the nature of the executive job. These are:

- A. Increase in power and influence of the Federation
- B. Changed nature of Jewish communal lay leadership
- C. Increased complexity of Jewish community center executive director's job
- D. Changed Jewish communal professional scene

Let us take a critical look at each of these "new realities."

A. *The Increase in Power and Influence of the Federation*

The urgent need to mobilize both political and economic support for Israel has dominated the Jewish communal agenda these past

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dozen years. The importance of that agenda and Federation's leadership role in its implementation contributed to the feeling that Federation "is where the action is." This, naturally, served to attract top lay leadership which not only aided in fund-raising, but created an opportunity to even more significantly impact on how funds are distributed and priorities set (not necessarily in that order). A quotation from an article by Charles Miller is illustrative of the extent to which this has gone:

"It is we in Federation who carry the overall responsibility for constructive community change. It is we who must change the ethnic system so that agencies are not ends in themselves, but are instruments created by the system to serve and strengthen the system. It is we who must ensure the survival of Jewish life and community in this country."¹

B. *Changed Nature of Jewish Communal Lay Leadership*

At the same time, Jewish communal lay leadership has changed. More often now:

- in their private pursuits, they are professionals and managers rather than entrepreneurs
- they seem to have a greater commitment to management and accountability than to the provision of service
- they are less likely to come to Federation leadership from constituent agencies, but more likely to have had some exposure to Federation or UJA young leadership development programs; they appear to be more Jewishly aware and concerned.
- insofar as the Jewish community center leadership, in particular, is concerned, they are more apt to be younger and with less ability to influence Jewish community decision-making.

C. *Increased Complexity of the Jewish Community Center Executive's Job*

To this mix, let's add the fact that with each passing year, the JCC executive's job has become more complex. This phenomenon is by no means limited to the Center field. President of Harvard University, Derek Bok, speaking to the Board of Overseers of his own job, reflected:

I sometimes wonder at an institution that asks a single individual to perform such varied tasks as deciding whom to select as Dean of Education; whether to build a power plant, reorganize buildings and grounds or veto the appointment of a physics professor; or how to allocate new resources among fields as different as botany and preventive medicine.

Jewish community centers have broadened their scope and significantly increased the size of their budgets in the past decade by percentages larger than those of inflation. New buildings were built; there was an expansion of the Jewish communal focus of service; there was a growing impetus to be more affirmatively Jewish. Centers searching for plus-dollars explored endowment and governmental funding sources. Most sophisticated management and accountability procedures called forth functional budgeting, accrual accounting, EDP, ZBB, MBO, and so on. A word like marketing, which to me used to conjure up pleasant images of rolls, eggs, cheese and milk stuffed in a mesh bag, now evokes words like customers, competitors and macro-environment. All these require specialized knowledge which, even if it is available to the executive on a paid or volunteer basis, requires the acquisition of new knowledge on his part.

The executive's task has been further complicated by current economic conditions. Inflationary factors have significantly added to the cost of operating our institutions, and it has not been possible to raise membership rates or service fees to keep pace. At the same time, funding agencies are finding it difficult to increase their fund-raising capabilities

¹ Charles Miller, "The Challenge of the Planning Function in the Intermediate Federation," this Journal, Vol. LV, No. 1 (1978), p. 58.

which has been reflected in a leveling off of allocations. This has not only increased the pressure to seek alternative forms of funding, but also to produce the same or expanded quality of service with diminished resources.

D. Changed Jewish Communal Professional Scene

Finally, the personnel picture with the Jewish communal field has changed. An examination of but one aspect, executive change in Jewish community centers, is instructive. Three factors have contributed to the current situation:

1. A generation of senior Center and Federation executives is in the process of retiring.

2. In the past few years, several senior Center executives have moved into leadership positions in the broader Jewish communal service field.

3. And, most important for this discussion, a number of our executive colleagues have had difficulty in coping with the demands of their positions. Some of these have resigned or been terminated, while others, though still on the job, are not meeting the expectations of their community's leadership. A review of some three dozen executive placements in intermediate, large and metropolitan Centers these last four years reveals that half of the individuals who moved did so under less than favorable circumstances.

Of equal and perhaps more serious concern are individuals currently on the job who are having difficulty. These fall into two categories. In most cases center lay leadership have either directly or indirectly voiced their concern and the executives involved have some awareness of the situation, though they may misread its gravity. In other situations, the concern about job performance comes not from Center but from Jewish community leadership. In these instances, the Center leadership tend to reflect the same view as the executive, but because they are not well connected with broader community leadership are unable to provide the executive with

needed perspective. It is possible in these situations for the executive not to be aware of a deepening crisis for the agency and himself.

The combination of the four "new reality" factors has produced a situation in which:

1. To a greater extent than heretofore, decisions affecting the Center are being made outside the Center's broad room, often by leadership that is unrelated to Center services. At a time when community fund-raising has plateaued, this takes on added significance.

2. Community priorities increasing reflect the need for services to be efficiently managed and "Jewish."

3. The complexity of the executive's job has presented a challenge even to those who are seasoned. Younger professionals moving into executive positions must cope not only with this complexity, but the likelihood that, with few exceptions, their staffs too will be younger, less experienced and also will be asked to assume tasks for which they may not be adequately trained.

A case in point is work with committees. My perception of practice in the Center field some fifteen years ago, was that it was some time before inexperienced workers assumed responsibility for work with committees and then only with careful monitoring by a senior professional. This is less likely to be so today. Younger workers are at times thrown into the breach with minimum assistance from their supervisors who themselves are striving to succeed at jobs which have become more complex.

4. Executives at all levels are taking a fresh look at what should be the priority demands on the executive's time, as well as the personal and professional qualities that help a person succeed as an executive. We shall approach this first by examining what key lay leadership have to say on the subject.

III. Lay Leadership Speak

The process of executive search begins with the development of a search committee which, in almost all cases, is composed of the top six

or eight leadership individuals the Center can command. These search committees begin by defining for themselves the agency priorities. They then list the qualities they intend looking for in the new executive and the qualifications they would expect this person to have. I have had the privilege of working with a number of these committees over the past four years and have found a remarkable similarity in their priorities.

A typical meeting might begin with someone stressing the need for a business-like approach to running the Center. In the discussion that ensues, this will usually get translated into the need for an executive with more sophisticated managerial skills, who has sufficient understanding to deal with knowledgeable staff and laymen in the broad area of administration and in the specific area of fiscal accountability.

Though this continues to be an important priority throughout the discussion, there are typically other qualities and qualifications which emerge as even more important. Leadership both within and without the agency is given high priority. Leadership is a quality ascribed to someone who:

- has a broad understanding of the Center field and the role of the Center in the community,
- can articulate where the Center needs to go and how to get there,
- can provide a strong sense of direction while allowing lay leaders to exercise their decision-making role,
- provides a climate which both builds staff esprit de corps and permits intelligent decision-making, and
- flies and has a red cap.

Typically, delivery of service is not expressed as a high priority and though there is an expectation that the executive will assume ultimate responsibility for staff function, his or her ongoing involvement with staff is rarely mentioned.

In some cases, there has been dissatisfaction with the previous executive's performance. In reflecting on the reasons, search committees have identified:

- unanticipated budget deficits
- failure to communicate with lay leaders
- difficulty in establishing relationships
- inability to provide leadership

In their discussions, these laymen noted that budget deficits per se, may, in certain circumstances, be understandable but for the executive not to know of this early on undermines confidence of lay leadership in this ability to cope with the complexities of management.

Difficulty in communication has taken two forms. Some executives have found it hard to share negatives, particularly when their own performance is involved. Others seem to assume that running the Center and providing executive leadership means operating with minimum interference by laymen.

Difficulty in maintaining relationships also appeared to take two different forms. The first I define as an over-reaction to the need to work with persons in positions of power. In this case, professionals are sometimes described as too assertive, and at others not assertive enough. The second example, is that of an executive who has developed fairly good relationships with a small coterie of lay leaders but has not reached out to emerging leadership.

A lack of leadership often includes:

- difficulty in making decisions and in accepting responsibility for decisions,
- failure to articulate goals and develop concrete steps to reach them and
- not being perceived as a leader by others in the community.

IV. Implications for Executive Practice

Before dealing with some of the specific implications, it should be stressed that good executive practice still needs to include:

- articulating a sense of mission and vision
- creating a stable climate in which mature decision-making can take place
- managing the use of available resources and giving leadership in the development of new resources
- soliciting and training a quality staff and

developing a professional climate in which they can work

- attracting and training quality lay leadership

An executive will still need to be a person with a strong ego who brings an understanding of people and can relate to and communicate with people.

There are five areas I would pinpoint for further discussion.

A. *Educating for Change*

Search committees by the end of their process usually recognize that the new executive brings certain strengths, as well as the need to acquire additional skills. Further, adaptation to continuing change is one of the realities of executive life. If it is imperative today to know more about endowments or government grants, tomorrow we may have to know more about energy efficiency or the effective use of volunteers or marketing. Thus, it is important to establish the need for continuing education as an integral part of executive practice. Moreover, this approach needs to pervade the agency. Seen in this context, continuing education is not just a nice sounding professional goal, but an imperative for success much less survival. Making it a reality has implications not only for how we allocate time and budget, but for how effectively we tap into the rich resource represented by our lay leaders.

B. *Basic Knowledge Areas*

Beyond the general concern for continuing education, there are two knowledge areas that deserve special attention if the executive is to continue to provide the kind of leadership that both identifies a mission and provides a means of implementation. These are a more sophisticated understanding of administration and a deepening of our Jewish knowledge.

Concerning administration, most executives need to obtain or refine their management and budgeting skills. These include learning the language and the appropriate questions to ask, as well as developing a mature understanding

of the use of money. I mention the latter point to discuss a particular nuance. The high value placed on balanced budgets, while appropriate, has led some executives to give this such weight that it tends to obscure the basic purposes of the agency and reduce the vision of its leadership. A fiscally responsible approach should include opportunities for lay leaders to weigh the short and long term consequences of their decisions.

Some of our talented lay leaders represent a teaching resource in the management and budgeting areas. By whatever means achieved, mastering this area affords one an opportunity to help leadership focus on the service mission of the center.

The JWB document titled *Standards for Jewish Community Centers* makes clear the primacy of the Jewish purposes of the agency. We need to aggressively pursue the acquisition of Jewish knowledge both because of our own learning needs and because we are individuals who influence others. Such knowledge seems to me basic if we are to articulate an authentic Jewish vision for our agencies. It was significant to me that when the participants in the Executive Development Training Program conducted by JWB had an opportunity to plan their final week of training, they chose to emphasize this area as essential if they were to fulfill their roles as Jewish communal leaders.

C. *Influencing Community Decisions*

In addition to our ongoing work in building effective boards, we need to recognize that many important community decisions will continue to be made at the Federation level or in other forums. For this reason and because the center executive seeks to function as a Jewish community leader, he or she must recognize the importance of being able to negotiate the community political arena. Beyond an awareness of the various forces at play, one must seek to develop access and influence with community decision-makers.

It is with a view to assisting new executives in this endeavor that JWB provides guidelines as to the composition of executive search

committees. To the extent that community decision makers are involved in the search process, the new executive has access to these people and hopefully some claim on their assistance as well.

D. Executive Evaluation

Evaluation of the executive on an annual or bi-annual basis is essential in helping the executive stay in touch with his practice as perceived by lay leadership. Lay leaders welcome this procedure as a structured method of helping the executive improve his practice and helping them clarify where they are going. Executive evaluation begins at hiring with the establishment of a clear "contract" as to what will be the mutual expectations.

E. Staff Development

We spoke earlier of continuing education, but did so primarily within the context of executive learning. One would expect that with so much of the agency's success determined by the quality of its staff, this would be a major aspect of Center endeavor. Yet, my experience in talking to new workers, middle managers, assistant executives and executives is that since this area does not appear to have an immediate payoff, it does not have priority. So I would stress again the need for supervision that is at least in part educationally focussed, training that includes opportunities for people to get to conferences and our collective need to raise salary standards.

The best staff development program in the world will be effective only if it begins with quality people. Our ability to obtain and retain leadership people is in good measure dependent on whether we are able to compete for their services. Entering Center salaries for MSWs are close to \$12,000 while beginning Federation salaries are at \$15,000, MBAs entering the corporate business world can command some \$20,000. Not only should we and our lay leaders see this as a vital priority for each agency, but of equal significance for the field.

In similar fashion, I would suggest that one important standard of executive success be the number of professionals produced by the agency for the field. Included in this notion, would be the expectation that a forward looking Center would want to benefit from the infusion of new ideas brought about by regularly obtaining competent professionals who have worked in other JCCs. A staff made up entirely of people from the community will tend to become parochial. When combined, as it often is, with lay leaders whose sights are limited because they avoid contact with leaders outside their own community, the institution may well suffer from hardening of the arteries.

V. Challenges to Executives as a Class

Our discussion has focussed on the changing scene, how this has affected executive practice and some of the implications for the individual executive. Let us look at some of the things executives can all do together.

Executive Development

Two years ago, in anticipation of a shortage of trained executives in the Center field, and in response to the input of a number of Center executives, JWB began an Executive Development Training Program. We believe such a program to be valuable and would endorse similar programs to help assistant directors meet the challenges of their middle management responsibilities.

Executive Training

It is necessary also to embark on a training program for current executives. Management, Jewish knowledge and becoming more politically adept, are three areas that suggest themselves for concentration.

Executive Recruitment

For the long term, I feel our best bet is a sound staff development program at all levels. Such a program begins with our ability to attract leadership individuals to the field.

In the short run, there is a need to selectively recruit qualified individuals from outside the

Center orbit. A special training effort will be required for these people and if possible, placement in a major Center where he or she can contribute fresh perspective while learning about Center practice.

The Executive Seminars

Each of the executive seminars can play a significant role in meeting the challenges posed in this paper. To begin with, they can help formulate and join with JWB in articulating a vision as to what the Jewish community center should be and then reinforce standards for practice that will move us closer to the achievement of that vision.

The executive seminars can develop into mutual support systems for their members. Some indeed have moved in this direction. A precondition for this is the development of a caring relationship between seminar members so that an individual can turn to his colleagues for advice and counsel. Each seminar represents a rich source which can be helpful to its

members in meeting many of the challenges they face.

VI. Conclusion

Though by design this paper dealt with some of the problems that confront us, it is important to close by providing a balancing perspective. The professionals who assumed their executive positions during this period of turnover are responding well to the challenges before them, and I believe we can expect a period of relative stability. Their determination to benefit from recent experience, as evidenced by the fact that this paper is being read at each of the executive seminars, augurs well. Best of all, in preparing for this paper, I had the opportunity to review a list of Center professionals who within the next three to five years will be ready to assume executive responsibility. They are an impressive group and with your care and attention, can help us provide Jewish communal leadership in the decades ahead.