

Succession Planning

by Hal M. Lewis

Sh'ma

February, 2007

Jewish organizations wishing to develop new leaders face a number of systemic challenges. Among them:

- Incumbents are hard-pressed to focus their energies on the next generation when current exigencies demand the experience of veterans.
- It is uncomfortable to raise issues of transition with organizational founders, philanthropists, or tenured executives.
- Past leaders who remain involved often serve as encumbrances to the seamless development of new ones.

Creating a culture in which leadership development is an organic component of the enterprise, then, is far from easy.

Premodern Jewish sources recognized these challenges as well. Many understood that power is alluring and difficult to abandon. As the midrash states, "It is easy to go up to a dais, difficult to come down." (*Yalkut, Va'etchanan 845*) While many believe recruiting a leader is an insurmountable task, it pales in comparison to the larger challenge, making room for the person who follows. Having savored the limelight, holders of high office are often reticent to walk away. The Talmud relates this story:

Rabbi Joshua ben Quivsay said: "All my life I would run away from office. Now that I have entered it, whoever comes to oust me I will come down upon him with this kettle." (Jerusalem Talmud, Pesachim 6:1; also see Menahot 109b)

Even Moses is said to have had difficulty forsaking the mantle of leadership. The sages compared him to a governor "who ... as soon as he retired and another was appointed in his place ... had in vain to ask the gate-keeper to let him enter [the palace]." (*Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:5*)

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of these obstacles, however, ignoring the development of new leaders impedes an organization's viability. Today, many of American Jewry's leading institutions have long-serving lay and professional officers who, despite their longevity, manifest little interest in addressing the issue of succession planning. Rare is the congregation or Jewish group, for example, with a comprehensive approach to volunteer or executive/rabbinic transition. Organizations that wait for a retirement announcement before thinking about future leadership jeopardize their integrity. Similarly, when decisions about the next lay leader are deferred to the eleventh hour, an organization's visioning and planning are irreparably compromised.

Further, only an enterprise that is genuinely open to new leaders and leadership styles can hope to attract and sustain the ongoing interest of younger individuals. Too often, prominent posts and important decision-making go only to the elite few, those pledging obeisance to conventional organizational praxis. Leaders on the inside are likely to stay there, with little more than lip service being accorded to alternate approaches. As recent surveys make clear, in the 21st century serious young Jews feel unwelcome in such environments and opt instead to dissociate themselves from communal organizations.

A number of classical Jewish sources suggest that the responsibility for making leadership development a top priority rests with those already considered leaders. Indeed, absent such a commitment, the moniker "leader" is simply inapposite.

No one personified this precept better than the Bible's quintessential leader, Moses. Notwithstanding the sages' account that even he had difficulty giving up his post, the Torah makes it clear that Moses succeeded in setting aside his personal needs for power for the long-term good of the people. So committed was he, for example, to the development of new leaders that he tolerated, indeed encouraged, the unconventional and untested leadership aspirations of Eldad and Medad (Numbers 11:24-29). Further, the biblical narrative makes clear that it was Moses himself who pushed God to name his successor (Numbers 27:15-17). And, according to Rashi and others, in the end Moses not only acknowledged Joshua's selection, he embraced it wholeheartedly (Rashi and *Sifre* to Numbers 27:23). Thus, despite the great sense of loss experienced by many at the end of their service, Moses' example serves as a dramatic reminder that an uncompromising focus on the future needs of the enterprise must always trump one's quest for personal glory.

A variety of contemporary best practices from industry and academe confirm the wisdom of these ancient insights. Even in the best of circumstances, leadership development is a difficult, protracted process. It succeeds only with the imprimatur of the incumbent leadership who must 1) create an ongoing organizational culture in which future leaders are constantly identified, nurtured, and trained, and 2) when appropriate, personally embody that principle by recognizing that the boldest act of effective leadership is often the decision to pass the torch to the next generation.

Hal M. Lewis is Dean of Continuing Education and Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Spertus College. A former nonprofit executive, he is the author of [*Models and Meanings in the History of Jewish Leadership*](#) and [*From Sanctuary to Boardroom: A Jewish Approach to Leadership*](#).

This essay is reprinted with permission from *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* February 2007. It was published as part of a series of essays on the Ethics of Jewish Leadership. For additional essays in the series, visit: <http://www.shma.com/ethics.phtml>.