

J O U R N E Y

MA'YAN

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**SEVEN WAYS TO MAKE OUR VOICES HEARD**

By Shifra Bronznick

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The following scenario from a Jewish organization may sound familiar. Women volunteer leaders on the board were troubled by a frustrating situation. On the one hand, they had succeeded in increasing the number of women holding leadership positions in the organization; on the other hand, they sensed that these women's voices were not being heard. They were faced with a paradox: Why hadn't the addition of women to the board altered their experience at major meetings?

After discussing the contradictions, the women developed a concrete plan of action to change the situation. They decided that in order to have real impact within the organization, they would have to change their behavior, as individuals and collectively. The first two steps below will describe how these women successfully overcame their minority position to make their voices heard.

Their two strategies, which I learned about as a result of my involvement on the project that Ma'yan launched to strengthen the impact of Jewish women volunteer leaders, inspired me to share their story and to glean five other lessons from the field.

**STEP UP TO THE MIKE**

In analyzing their own behaviors, the women noticed that they were loathe to rush up to the microphone at a large forum or be the first to speak in a board discussion. They noticed that, by contrast, men aggressively fought to "weigh in" on issues. The women recognized that in order to be heard, they needed to take the lead. Over time, these women found themselves more comfortable in taking the leadership role in important meetings. The cumulative effect of this change was that their voices became more central in framing group discussions.

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## REPETITION MATTERS

This same group of women saw that although they had become accustomed to speaking first, they rarely repeated themselves. When they dissected the behavior of their male counterparts, they noticed that men reiterated, in different words, ideas that had already been expressed. This is not a coincidence. Change management experts confirm that the most effective way to communicate new ideas is through repetition — as many as 30 times. One presentation, no matter how compelling, is never sufficient to educate, inform or persuade. This group of women made deliberate efforts to speak up at meetings, even to repeat the points of male colleagues in their own words. Once again, their behavior had a cumulative effect, as they raised their profile at meetings and began to create an organizational climate that was more conducive to women's leadership.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

In a recent interview with a Jewish female president of a major university, I asked about her strategies for making her voice heard in a traditional environment dominated by senior male academics and male trustees. She responded, "I am neither pushy nor loud. But my timing is impeccable, and I know just when to speak up and make an idea resonate for a group."

Timing is a critical skill. Jewish women leaders can increase the odds that they will have an impact in a meeting when they not only focus on *what* they want to say, but take a strategic approach about *when* they speak. Often an idea needs to circulate several times in a discussion before it is likely to become widely accepted by the group. The person who is artful about articulating a concept at that critical moment greatly expands her opportunity to influence a group.

## GIVING CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

In my interviews with Jewish women volunteer leaders from dozens of organizations, every woman reported feeling frustrated when her ideas were credited to others, angered by the frequency of this experience, and awkward about reclaiming her leadership position.

A simple tactic, suggested by a Jewish foundation executive, offers real potential for changing this dynamic. "You can't take the credit back for yourself," this executive reported. "But you can get the credit for another woman in the room. If Barbara is the originator of an idea, but Jim is getting the credit, Sheila can change the balance of power by saying, 'That's a great idea for launching the campaign. I was impressed with the idea when Barbara suggested it originally. I'm glad that Jim reiterated it and I, too, want to express my support for Barbara's terrific concept.'"

In practice, this idea works like a charm. If enough women consistently responded in this way to a "credit grab," the dynamics of these groups would shift markedly, with a more level playing field created for women's ideas.

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## WEIGH IN ON THE ISSUES

Women tend to succeed by exceeding expectations, which is consistent with the conventional wisdom that women need to be twice as good as their male counterparts to combat the negative impact of bias. This intensity of focus may help women to succeed in their own institution, but the effort involved often constrains them from having broader influence. Women need to use their expertise and credibility to exert a stronger influence on the communal agenda. They need to use their status as a platform for broader leadership, whether it's weighing in on Israel on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* or playing a major role in the forums of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, or any other Jewish organization.

Women leaders need to extend their organizational expertise into public communal leadership. There's a lot to be gained from becoming a pundit of Jewish affairs, and it's equally important to create a list of other women with the expertise and stature to weigh in on the issues. The next time you hear, "Of course, we'd be happy to have a woman speak, but we don't know any woman who knows about..." fill in the blank. Make the list of women who can and should be considered as speakers and spokespersons, and keep it handy.

## THE NUMBERS COUNT: IF YOU WANT TO BE HEARD, KEEP COUNTING

Esther Dyson, an intellectual leader in the technology field, wrote some years ago in the *New York Times* that she had assumed that the Internet would eradicate the gender gap. She was shocked to discover that when she was the only female in the room, her voice was completely ignored by her male colleagues and friends. The problem here is less about group dynamics and more about numbers. Research compiled by Virginia Valian in the book *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women* (MIT Press, 1998), confirms that women need to comprise at least one third of a group before they are perceived as equal members. In 1994, Ma'yan commissioned a study of women on boards of national Jewish organizations and opened up the conversation about why so few of these organizations had adequate female representation. The best way to ensure the amplification of women's voices is to make sure there are enough women at the table. The act of counting matters, and so does the actual count.

## PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

Letty Cottin Pogrebin spoke to the symbolic value of philanthropy when she asked, "If you were run over by a truck today, what would we learn about you from your checkbook?" Her question has inspired Jewish feminist philanthropists like Barbara Dobkin and Sally Gottesman to keep asking Jewish women to ask themselves: "Do your financial expenditures reflect your beliefs and values? Are your charitable contributions aligned with the issues that you say represent your personal and philosophical priorities? How careful are you about ensuring that your charitable choices will have real impact? How do

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you express your commitment to advance women and girls? Personal and family philanthropy is an opportunity to express the full measure of our beliefs. How generous can you really be? And how courageous?"

## **CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S VOICES CHANGE THE CONVERSATION**

Ma'yan's mission, to be a catalyst for making the Jewish community more inclusive of and responsive to women, has been fueled by the conviction that advancing women will create broader change. There is increasing receptivity to the message that women's voices will expand and enrich the communal conversation. To leverage our influence as individuals into a collective endeavor that results in powerful change is a challenge. But each and every intervention counts, and that is why women need to be strategic and persistent in finding ways to make our voices heard.

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