

How Research Fuels Change

by Shifra Bronznick

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When AWP, in partnership with UJC, published a report of research findings on the obstacles to women's leadership in the federation world, many male federation CEOs – and the most senior level women – greeted the publication with a grimace or a shrug and the phrase, “No surprises.”

“Why should it be filled with surprises?” I would ask. The purpose of our research was to capture the current realities. If we did our job properly, the findings should actually have elicited that click of recognition.

But that expression of “no surprise” was actually a way to deflect discomfort. These leaders and senior professionals – many of whom we interviewed for the report -- were uncomfortable with research that named the obstacles outright – for example, the old boys' club, explicit gender bias, critical weaknesses in the human resource development system, lack of support for flexibility, and work-life balance. Moreover, the report demonstrated that these features were not idiosyncratic, nor were they limited to a few federations, but rather this was a systemic pattern that could be traced throughout 14 communities.

The presence of systemic bias in the evaluation of women's potential for leadership, is often obscured by what Stanford University researcher, Deborah Rhode calls, the “no problem, problem.” So many people are convinced that nothing stands in the way of women's advancement – after all, we see women entering every field... So many people are convinced that they judge women and men equitably, based purely upon merit. And many people fail to see that, as a result of their unconscious assumptions about gender, as described by Virginia Valian, distinguished faculty member of CUNY and author of *Why So Slow The Advancement of Women*, men accrue small privileges but, over time, these small privileges accumulate into a mountain of advantage.

The purpose of our research was to establish a common fact base about the perceptions of bias in the federation system, as the context for orchestrating a communal conversation about what needs to be changed -- in our assumptions, norms, practices, and policies -- in order to expand opportunities for women's advancement. This strategy was similar to the one that my colleagues at Ma'yan and I had developed to engage organizational leaders after the publication of Ma'yan's groundbreaking research on women and national boards.

When I was assembling the initial AWP team – composed of both academics like Dr. Sherry Israel, Dr. Shaul Kelner and Dr. Steven Cohen, and practitioners like me, and my colleague, Didi Goldenhar, I sought a way to articulate this goal. Shaul gave us the

language for this philosophy that has guided us from the beginning. He said, “I get it...the research is the first intervention.”

Today, I want to talk about the tangible ways in which our research has been used, again and again, as an intervention into the system to stimulate new thinking about issues of gender equity and to support specific change strategies that have previously been rejected by the community.

Our report was released in January 2004. Professor Steven Cohen and I were invited to present our findings to the Board of Trustees of the UJC. At first, we were given 20 minutes on the agenda. I insisted on a 75-minute slot, to allow us the time to engage the trustees in small group facilitated conversations. I was convinced that a frontal approach would bring on that chorus of “No surprises” and other expressions of resistance to charges of gender bias in their system. We demanded and ultimately received sufficient time to present our findings, followed by facilitated conversations that gave people the time and the conversational latitude to talk intelligently with each other about issues raised in the report and to begin to explore what kind of change strategies they would propose.

We repeated this process in many settings, at federations and at the GA and in many other venues – with top professionals, lay leaders, high potential women, and up-and-coming young people in the field, all predicated on our conviction that we need people at every level in the system – both women and men – to collaborate with us in developing a multi-faceted strategy that would respond to the different dimensions of the problem.

The result of this process of community engagement is an ambitious 4-page work plan – the highlights are captured in your handouts in the back. With this work plan, we were able to say to the UJC professional and lay leadership, that these ideas for change emerged from conversations with people throughout your community. The fact of this community engagement gave our recommendations much-needed leverage. And because some of these recommendations ran very much counter to the prevailing culture, we needed that additional leverage.

Let me give an example. Our research findings underscore the scant attention paid to human resources and professional development in the Jewish community. Our senior leadership bemoans the meager supply of professional talent and yet, there is nothing resembling a system for talent identification, recruitment and cultivation. While both women and men suffer from this shortfall, women are affected disproportionately because of the system’s pervasive gender bias. Women are less likely to be mentored and frequently encounter more stringent standards in performance evaluations and search processes. Typically, women are judged by their accomplishments while men are assessed for their future potential. We found ample evidence that, in almost every dimension of talent identification and cultivation, women are kept at the margins.

So we knew that, to advance women into leadership would require significant redress of this situation. Women would have to participate in the kind of high profile executive

development programs that, in previous years, had moved senior-level men into the executive suite. So we recommended that, in the next iteration of the UJC's Mandel EDP program, there should be an explicit goal of recruiting 50% women candidates. Not surprisingly, when I brought this idea to UJC's then CEO, Steve Hoffman, he rejected it flat-out. "No, I don't like quotas."

"This is not about quotas," I said "It is a recruitment goal."

We went back and forth. I emphasized our findings about the leaky pipeline in the system – with many more women represented in the lower and middle ranks and men overwhelmingly occupying the senior and executive positions. Still, I said, with women representing more than 50% of the professional workforce in the system, it was not unreasonable to expect that we could recruit appropriately credentialed women candidates for the 25-slot program. I brought him research studies authored by prominent scholars that show definitively that, in a variety of professional settings, women have to perform 2.5 times as well to score performance ratings equal to their male counterparts. We kept returning to the research itself. "Your own leaders acknowledge bias in the system," I said. "No surprises, they say." "If we agree that gender bias exists, it must follow that something must be done to push back against that bias. And if that systemic bias has created a culture in which women do not see themselves as executive material, then the system is obligated to demonstrate greater readiness, by seeking out talented women with executive potential and by setting a goal of finding 30 great candidates for the applicant pool of 60."

We never did reach agreement on the philosophical principles underlying this goal. Instead, I found language that bridged AWP and UJC, writing in the work plan that "Ideally, 50% of the candidates will be women." This hardly ended the conversation with top professional and lay leaders. Some said, "Take out 'ideally' and let's go for 50%." Others kept circling around the "quota" issue. But the words stuck and we repeated them in every setting, until the words "fifty percent" began to take on their own life and momentum. Over the next few months, high-level committee members and senior professionals started repeating this language; it was as if they forgot or were unaware that this goal had barely been endorsed by the reluctant leadership.

We then used our report as the basis for proposing changes in the selection process for the Mandel EDP. Again, we relied on our mantra: "No surprises." If, as their leaders agreed, there is systemic gender bias, then it was incumbent upon the Mandel EDP to ensure that such bias would not infect the selection process.

For example, the first EDP program required applicants to be nominated by their federation CEO. However, our research showed that federation CEOs – overwhelmingly male -- believe that women are less likely to be perceived as CEO candidates. This finding gave us credible cause to recommend that professionals be encouraged to nominate themselves, to allow women who otherwise might not be recognized as candidates to put their names forward. While CEOs must still sign off on each application, they no longer serve as the sole gatekeepers in the application process.

The results have been dramatic and rewarding. We have achieved our “ideal” goal of 50% women in the candidate pool, thanks in large part to AWP’s Program Director, Audra Berg, who called high-potential women in every federation community and encouraged them to apply.

Self-nomination has also brought issues of gender equity and professional goals to the forefront. For example, several federations have submitted multiple applications – both self-nominated and CEO-nominated. For these CEOs, this process reveals the career aspirations among their professionals that may have been ignored or dismissed.

Now AWP is working with UJC on the selection process itself. Again, we are beginning with our research, which demonstrated the explicit and implicit gender bias that typically legislates against women in the selection process for federation executives. We have called upon our academic advisors to help us create a modest but effective training module on gender issues for the EDP selection committee. Here again, we proceed from research literature in the field that demonstrates that “both men and women rate the quality of men’s work as higher than that of women when they are aware of the sex of the person to be evaluated but not when the person’s gender is unknown.”

For example, in a structured experiment designed to evaluate candidates for an engineering position, subjects were told to rank the relative importance of education and professional experience. The researchers found that when a woman candidate presented greater work experience and her male counterpart presented more educational credentials, the subjects ranked education as the preferable criterion for hiring. If, however, the woman candidate presented greater educational credentials and the male candidate presented more work experience, the subjects ranked experience as the preferable criterion. We will be bringing these kinds of examples to our selection committee, to alert them to the assumptions we make about gender, even when we believe that we are acting equitably and paying meticulous attention to merit.

Until now, I have referred to findings from our research that are largely anecdotal, based on our interviews with 93 federation CEOs, lay leaders and high-level women professionals. Now I want to talk about how hard data can also fuel organizational change. At AWP, we believe that what we measure matters, and that measuring and monitoring are critical to the process of change. One of AWP’s central recommendations was the creation of a system for data collection and monitoring, specifically in reference to professional positions and salaries. Dr. Steven M. Cohen, AWP’s Research Director, has drafted a template for capturing and analyzing this data throughout the federation system. Each federation – large, small and intermediate -- will contribute to these data sets, to be collected on an annual basis and will have access to the information, in order to monitor progress and compare its standing, relative to other federations. Again, our goal is to use research as a stimulant for action: we believe that, given the tools to monitor their progress, federations will be motivated to explore what is working and what needs to change within their own systems to begin to close the gender gap on positions and salaries.

Finally, our qualitative research continues. We recently completed another series of facilitated conversations about our research findings with 120 UJC professionals, led by an AWP team, including my colleague Didi Goldenhar and consultants Sherry Israel, Pearl Beck, Ann Cohen, Melodye Feldman, and Marty Linsky. Again, “No surprises.” Our findings about federations were echoed at every level within UJC – including the old boys’ network, the adverse effects of weak human resources on women professionals, the lack of support for work-life balance, and the gender bias that legislates against women in the hiring and promotion process. These conversations, which we see as a subsequent phase of research, illuminated two of our major operating hypotheses: first, that when we identify and describe the obstacles that affect women, we reveal the obstacles that affect everyone in the workforce; and second, that these obstacles affect professionals not only at the highest echelons, but at every level of the organization.

As we continue to issue these reports, I expect that many organizational leaders will continue to shrug and say, “No surprises.” What I have learned from our experience and what I expect to reply is the following: “Good. I am glad you are not surprised by these findings. Now I can tell you how surprised I am. Given your familiarity with the gender inequities in your agency and your awareness of how out-of-step your organization is respective to work-life flexibility and how mindful you are about the gaps in professional development in your shop, how is it that you have done nothing to change the situation? That’s what’s surprising.”

A very highly-ranked leader in the Jewish community once asked me, “Doesn’t every field fail to find a way to advance women? Is the Jewish community actually so far behind the curve?” The answer is “Yes” to both questions. Yes, many fields have failed to close the leadership gap for women. And yes, the Jewish community really is that far behind the curve. Unlike the corporate world, academia, the professions and the sciences, we have distinguished ourselves as being the only organized community that has not made any efforts or experimented with any ways to achieve parity for women.

Now, with qualitative and quantitative research in hand, we have made our first intervention. We expect to keep bringing our research into the communal conversation and to hold our leaders accountable for closing the gap, between what they know and what they do, in order to create and sustain meaningful change.