

The CEO Search Process

When asked to consider how gender plays into the executive search process, Jewish organizational

leaders often ask, “Shouldn’t we just choose the best person for the job?”

We all want to believe that we make leadership choices in the context of a strict meritocracy. However, our Jewish communal habits do tend to mirror the gender-biased tendencies in other professions, as well as our own particular prejudices.

In her book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, the distinguished psychologist Dr. Virginia Valian synthesized her research about the negative effects of “gender schema” on women’s advancement. Valian found that the effect of being viewed through a gender lens is that men accrue advantages: “small but numerous molehills that accumulate over time to produce a mountain of advantage for men.”

Research in the fields of medicine, law, and academia all indicate that women have to perform better than men in order to be rated equally by their colleagues. For example, in analysis of peer review scores for medical post-doctoral fellowship applications, researchers found that women applicants had to be 2.5 times more productive on average than men to receive the same competence score (Bickel 2001).

In one research study cited in *Why So Slow*, resumes with excellent and equivalent credentials were sent to chairs of 147 university psychology departments. The chairs offered to hire the candidates. Male resumes were offered mid-level posts as associate professors. The *same* resumes with female names were offered entry-level posts as assistant professors.

Given this reality, we cannot assume that leadership searches in the Jewish community are conducted by meritocratic standards that set aside questions of gender.

The search process is an important venue for creating a more equitable and effective approach to leadership selection in the Jewish community. But many search processes are already compromised because so few women occupy prominent roles. Organizations tend to cling to fixed mental models; even with good intentions, some people will find it hard to imagine women in those senior positions.

In fact, many of the women holding CEO positions in the Jewish community established their professional credentials elsewhere.

If Jewish organizations are determined to recruit from the full range of excellent candidates, they will have to correct for their tendency to overlook women who have spent their careers in the Jewish community.

IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Outsiders as CEOs: Where Did They Come From?

Ruth Messinger: CEO, American Jewish World Service – NYC politics

Karen Barth: former head, Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education – McKinsey & Company

Hannah Rosenthal: former head, Jewish Council on Public Affairs – Health and Human Services, Clinton Administration

Morlie Levin: national executive director, Hadassah – RAND Corporation

Elise Bernhardt: executive director, National Foundation for Jewish Culture – The Kitchen (contemporary arts organization)

EXAMINE EACH PHASE OF THE CEO SEARCH PROCESS

- How does the search process work inside your organization?
- Who is involved? Lay leaders? Search firms?
- Who writes the job description and qualifications?
- What are the referral sources?
- Who interviews finalists?
- How are the professionals involved in the search process?
- At each stage of the process, what procedures help or hinder the advancement of women?

REVISE THE SEARCH CRITERIA

How have the search criteria been developed? More than likely, the desired characteristics and skills mirror the person who now holds the position. If the incumbent has been successful, the search committee will find it hard to imagine the job being done another way or performed by a different kind of person; for example, by a woman.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism asked AWP to conduct a pilot project with the goal of improving the search process.

Maxine Epstein, Marin region director of the Jewish Community Federation, has written of her experience in seeking an interview for a federation CEO position:

I stared at the photo of two shoes; one a man's shoe, one a woman's shoe. The headline for the cover story of the Northern California Jewish Bulletin, was "Who Will Fill These Shoes?" The article described how there were no "qualified" Jewish communal professionals to "fill the shoes" of the CEO position of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, and Sonoma Counties, a position which had remained vacant for at least a year.

In the article, there were three pictures – the current federation president (a man); the head of the search committee (a man); and the immediate past federation CEO (also a man). Did I mention that all the CEOs for the past hundred years of this federation were men? I would like to add that all three gentlemen are truly gifted and dedicated leaders of our community.

Because I am a leader with vision and integrity, because I believe in challenging the status quo in the pursuit of excellence, and because I believe it is time for more of us in middle management do the same... I decided to be bold and to do the unthinkable... to suggest that the search committee might consider me, local Maxine Epstein, for an executive position in our federation.

Let me borrow a phrase from our great crone foremother Sojourner Truth:

"Hey, Ain't I a Candidate? Ain't I a Jewish Communal Professional with over twenty years experience in the field? Ain't I got two master's degrees, a proven track record of successful fund-raising and community building, and love of Yiddishkeit!?"

Doesn't the Jewish world require and demand a woman's presence sitting around the Jewish communal table, envisioning and developing the shifting paradigms required to meet the challenges that face our Jewish Community in this 21st century.?!

After reading the article "Who Will Fill These Shoes?" I went to my closet and opened a box of very nice blue pumps, recently purchased. Around each shoe, I wrapped a copy of the article, my resume, and my vision for the future of this Bay Area Jewish community. I sent one to the president and one to the head of the search committee.

It has been many months since sending off my shoes and my suggestions for shifting paradigms, consideration of flex time, job sharing, and management restructuring that would allow the best of us to succeed. I can honestly say that this dramatic act of arm-waving and quiet shouting, "Hey, I'm right under your noses, and I represent a lot of others like me" made no difference whatsoever. And I kind of miss my shoes.

AWP designed a training program for USCJ regional directors to help them work more effectively with synagogues that were seeking rabbis. One aspect of the program was incorporating CLA's Adaptive Leadership approach that we present in this guidebook. The regional directors were trained to facilitate conversations with search committees about their criteria for the rabbinic position to help them manage the resistance from the committees about considering a woman rabbi.

OPEN THE CLUB DOORS

We often hear that the old boys' club holds sway over the search process. What can you do to open the club doors? You can encourage women in your agency to apply and guide them through the process. You can network among colleagues, friends, and family to identify qualified women. You can post the announcement with women's organizations in your community. Anyone – manager, staff, volunteer, or donor – can serve as an unofficial recruiter.

Your search committee also should reach beyond the club to include perspectives from women and men, and from younger as well as senior volunteer leaders. You can also involve people outside the search process – to define the criteria, to recruit, and to nominate.

INCREASE THE POOL

Research cited in Valian's *Why So Slow?* shows that token candidates are judged more harshly in the search process than when they are part of a larger group in the applicant pool.

In one experiment, a woman's resume was judged negatively when it was in a resume pool of 10% women and 90% men.

The same resume was still judged negatively, but less so, when it

Ruth Messinger, president of AJWS, recalls of her hiring, after years of service as Manhattan Borough President:

The job and I fell into each other. The board needed someone who was willing to come into an organization in a mess – which men rarely do. This is one of the ways that women can make progress, when things are at a bad pass. Over the last twenty years, a significant number of women have been elected to Congressional seats that were perceived to belong to the other party. At some point, a woman who has toiled for the party says, "Just let me run." And they say, "We can't find any more men, so we'll let her run." And then she wins. I had that experience. I had a name. And my board was willing to accept all of the negatives that came with my name. They took me because the organization was in a mess and I was willing to come in.

was included in a pool of 25% women and 75% men.

However, when that same resume was included in a group of 37% women and 63% men, it was judged favorably.

By encouraging women to apply for openings, you increase the likelihood that a woman will get the job.

EDUCATE THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

Start a conversation with the search committee to surface their assumptions about women candidates and to encourage new ways of thinking. There is ample research showing how the gender lens subverts what appears to be a meritocratic search process.

Some corporate leaders have observed that when a woman is considered for a new position, the hiring person or search committee usually makes judgments based on her *past achievements*. By contrast, men are frequently assessed for their *future potential*. Is it any surprise that these assumptions favor men over women in hiring?

We present examples of current research in the accompanying sidebar. Bring this tip sheet to your search committee, distribute it to influential people in your organization, post it on your organization's Web site or include it in its newsletter.

BROADEN THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

While interviews are important, they are inaccurate instruments, in and of themselves, for predicting future job performance. Moreover, women can be placed at a disadvantage in the traditional interview framework. For example, male recruiters for a prominent financial firm found that fewer qualified women candidates progressed past the initial interview phase – when the interview was structured in the traditional thirty-minute format. The reason was that male candidates were able to bond more quickly with their male counterparts. When the recruiters extended the interviews with women to forty-five minutes, the result was an increase in female hires (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000).

Experiment with different approaches to the interview. Ask for written material and short presentations. By offering candidates more ways to showcase their accomplishments and articulate their vision, you will reduce gender bias *and* ensure that the best candidate is selected.

The Search Process Through a “Gender Lens”

In one study, men and women applied for an engineering job, a field in which men predominate. Resumes were drafted for men and women with information about educational background and professional experience. The research subjects were instructed to rank the relative importance of *education* or *experience* as criteria for selection.

The study showed that when a woman candidate presented more work experience and her male counterpart presented more educational credentials, then the subject ranked *education* as the primary criterion for hiring. If the woman candidate presented better educational credentials, and the male candidate presented better work experience, the subjects ranked *experience* as the primary criterion.

“Casuistry and Social Category Bias,” Norton, Vandello, et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, December 2004.

In a Swedish study of postdoctoral fellows, peer reviewers assigned points to job candidates. Despite the progressive character of Swedish society, researchers found that the peer reviewers gave female applicants lower scores than male applicants with the *same level* of scientific productivity. In fact, only the *most productive* women candidates – women whose accomplishments rated a full one hundred points – were judged equally competent to the least productive group of male candidates, men who achieved a score of only twenty points.

“Nepotism and Sexism in Peer Review,” Wenneras and Wold, Nature Publishing Group, May 1997.

Over the past thirty years, screens have become commonplace in orchestra auditions. During this period, the number of women in top American orchestras has increased by 25%. A principal musician for the Metropolitan Opera commented, “I’ve been in auditions without screens, and I assure you that I was prejudiced. I began to listen with my eyes, and there is no way that your eyes don’t affect your judgment. The only true way to listen is with your ears and your heart.”

“Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians,” Goldin and Rouse, *American Economic Review*, September 2000.