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OPINION

Flexibility and More Mentors Will Expand the Number of Female Nonprofit CEO's

By Shifra Bronznick and Didi Goldenhar

To close the gender gap in the leadership of the nonprofit world, organizations need to improve their policies and practices regarding how employees balance their personal and professional lives.

Women make up two-thirds of the professional work force at nonprofit groups, yet only 19 percent of the nation's 400 largest charities have a woman as chief executive officer, according to the recent *Chronicle of Philanthropy* survey.

In our decade of research and advocacy on women's leadership at Jewish organizations, we have found comparable data: Despite a work force that is more than 75 percent female, women direct only a handful of national organizations and none of the Jewish federations in the largest American cities.

If women — the majority of the work force — are not being cultivated for chief-executive posts, nonprofit groups are not making the best use of the dollars and professional development that they have already invested in their staffs. The persistence of the gender gap also signals a complacency that is at odds with the values and can-do spirit of these mission-driven organizations.

Strategies to diversify leadership have been tested in philanthropic and academic institutions, with measurable results. Fifty-five percent of chief executives and chief grant makers at foundations are women, as are 23 percent of college presidents, including the presidencies of four of the eight Ivy League universities.

Identifying high-potential talent, providing access to mentors, giving assignments that stretch the skills of promising middle managers, dismantling the "old boys' club," and improving the executive-search process — all those steps are critical to diversifying the leadership bench, including women and minorities. But for women, work-life policy is often the decisive factor in determining access to leadership opportunities. Balancing personal and professional responsibilities is a challenge for everyone. However, the impact on women is greater, as studies show that they continue to shoulder about two-thirds of household and caregiving responsibilities within families.

Formal policies for flexibility — including job shares, telecommuting, and compressed work weeks — dramatically lower the barriers to advancement and change the perception of women as potential leaders. Results in the law profession, academe, accounting, professional services, and other corporate settings have been documented by Catalyst, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Workplace Center at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and the Center for Work-Life Policy.

We recently conducted a national survey on flexibility policies and practices at a wide variety of Jewish organizations. Survey responses from 227 organizations, of every size and type, indicated some degree of receptivity to improved work-life practices and policies. For example, nearly 90 percent of the responding organizations offered some type of informal flexibility to workers. However, only a minority (29 percent) had formal, written flexibility policies.

Does it matter whether flexibility is formal or informal? Certainly informal flexibility, granted on a case-by-case basis, is better than none. The disadvantage is that individuals must depend on the benevolence and good sense of their supervisors. Informal flexibility also conveys a mixed message about making progress on the career track. Professionals who take advantage of these privileges may lose traction with respect to salaries and promotions.

Some women who benefit from informal flexibility find that their organizations are "family friendly" but that they have been sidelined on the "mommy track." Other women find that their work environments are inhospitable to those with caregiving responsibilities. Formal policies can lower barriers to advancement by creating new norms that validate women's career ambitions and their caregiving commitments.

Several studies, including those conducted by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, strongly suggest that a comprehensive work-life policy also drives an organization's effectiveness. While Ms. Hewlett's research, as reported this year in the *Harvard Business Review*, focused on IBM and Best Buy, the guiding principles are applicable to nonprofit employers. With flexible work arrangements in place, employees became increasingly accountable for coordinating teamwork, maximizing communication, and ensuring effectiveness. Such research underscores the value of flexibility in helping to make the organizational shift from working harder to working smarter.

We recognize that the need for work-life balance is not limited to women. Taking care of children and older relatives, volunteering, and pursuing graduate education are activities that professionals of both genders and every generation want to explore, and that requires work flexibility. In fact, Ms. Hewlett's research shows that 89 percent of younger workers and 87 percent of baby boomers rated work-life balance as a key attribute of desirable employers.

Leadership development and succession, a topic of much discussion in the nonprofit world, offers another context for considering work-life policies. Within the next five to 10 years, a wave of retirements will shift the demographics of the nonprofit world, with a new generation rising to chief-executive and senior-manager positions. Those future executives are today's high-potential professionals.

While those young people, two-thirds of them women, aspire to leadership on behalf of a broad range of causes, they fully expect to integrate their professional goals and their personal lives. Preparing those professionals for their inevitable ascendancy requires a new orientation to management and organizational effectiveness.

We urge nonprofit organizations to start the conversation about work-life policy. Discussing such issues openly is the first step in creating an environment where professional excellence is evaluated less by face time and more on measurable results. By removing work-life obstacles for women professionals on the career trajectory, the leadership *pipeline* can become a leadership *pool* that is deep and diverse.

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