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Making 100 Organizations in the Same Industry More Flexible... Key Lessons Learned

By [Cali Williams Yost](#)

In all of the years I've helped companies rethink the inflexible ways we work, I'd never seen anyone coordinate an effort to get 100 organizations in the same community to embrace flexibility at the same time. That is until I met the indefatigable Shifra Bronznick and her team at Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (AWP). [1]

The mission of AWP is "to promote the leadership of women within Jewish communal institutions and to advocate for healthy workplace practices that benefit both men and women." The issue, as AWP defines it, is that a majority of the professionals in the Jewish nonprofit community are women, while most of the leaders are men. AWP wants to close that gap.

More details regarding the multi-faceted change process they've undertaken to close that gap can be found here [2], but one of the primary solutions they're targeting is greater workplace flexibility. To promote a more formal, strategic approach, AWP created the Better Work, Better Life Campaign [3] which is "aimed at enlisting 100 Jewish organizations in improving their policies on flexibility and parental leave."

Recently, I was invited to present at a convening of 30 of the *Better Work, Better Life* organizations to discuss strategies to advance flexibility. This gave me a unique opportunity to observe first-hand what happens when organizations from the same industry gather to share best practices and support innovation in workplace flexibility. Here are my three key takeaways from the event:

Lesson #1: Peer-to-Peer Influence is the Most Powerful

Humans resist change with every tool they have at their disposal. And the most powerful weapon of all is, "Oh, that might work for an accounting firm, but it won't succeed in manufacturing." In other words, we dismiss the applicability of something new because we believe that a unique quality of your industry or organization makes it non-transferable.

But it's much harder to dismiss information when it comes from an organization with a business model that's just like yours. In this case, nonprofit and mission-driven. When Sari Ferro from UJA-Federation of NY [4] shared the steps that she followed to get a more formal flexibility process implemented in her workplace, you could tell from the follow up questions that her story prompted the group to see possibilities, not roadblocks.

Lesson #2: No Matter Where You Are On the Flex Innovation Curve, You Can Be Part of the Same Conversation.

There's a [standard flexibility innovation curve](#) [5] that most organizations follow. And while it's important to meet organizations where they are on that curve, there's a benefit to having the more advanced entities in the same room with those just getting started.

During the *Better Work, Better Life* convening, I facilitated a discussion of the strategies that we'd covered throughout the afternoon. At my table sat representatives from a couple of organizations that were relatively far along the innovation curve in terms of advancing formal flexibility and a couple of others for whom it was very new. Yet, you could see that the experience of those who had "been there done that" informed the thinking of those just starting to dip their toes in the water.

Lesson #3: There Are Many Creative Ways to Scale a Clear Vision for Change

The clarity, passion and commitment of the AWP team to advance their mission has driven them to develop creative vehicles to scale their efforts and impact including,

- AWP Action Teams--Training others to be change agents and fan out into the broad community.
- The Bay Area Project--Leveraging the success of the large number of women in the Bay Area who occupy senior positions in Jewish foundations to influence change.
- Men as Allies--Engaging influential men to advance more shared leadership. This effort include "Sign the Pledge" where men agree not to appear on public panels without women.

Spending time with the 30 organizations that participated in the *Better Work, Better Life* convening reminded me of the power of peer influence, and how beneficial it is to share best practices no matter where your organization is on the flexibility innovation curve. Imagine how much further along we'd be if groups of accounting firms, advertising agencies or hospitals worked together and shared best practices related to flexibility.

Finally, never doubt the power of the clear vision of a small group as they scale and grow in impact. Go AWP!

For more, I invite you to visit my [Work+Life Fit blog](#) [6], and to join me on Twitter [@caliyost](#)