

Living our Values and Leading the Way,

By Shifra Bronznick

Marty Linsky, a Wexner faculty member and my long-time colleague, often teaches about the challenge of adaptive leadership. Marty always says, “Leadership is disappointing people at a rate they can absorb.”

That’s true, and so is the reverse. Leadership also requires *absorbing* disappointment and not becoming so frustrated that we miss small indicators of progress, the bright spots that illuminate the road to fundamental change.

Nowhere has this truth been more apparent to me than in the *Better Work, Better Life Campaign*, launched by Advancing Women Professionals & the Jewish Community in 2009, with the aim of enlisting 100 Jewish organizations in improving their policies around paid parental leave and formal flexible work arrangements.

Our audacious goal was to complete the Campaign in one year. Three years later, with sixty-two Jewish organizations on board, we are short of our goal but proud of those who have enlisted, including large institutions like JFNA, UJA-Federation of New York, the Joint Distribution Committee, the AVI CHAI Foundation, and the Weinberg Foundation and smaller start-ups like Yeshivat Hadar, Mayan, Moving Traditions, Keshet, and the Jewish Women’s Archive.

We have learned a lot from both our disappointments and bright lights along the way. At the start, most of these organizations said they couldn’t afford such policies. At large agencies, the concern was about “opening the floodgates” to large numbers of people taking advantage of flexibility and paid parental leave. At smaller organizations, the concern was of replacement costs for personnel on paid family leave.

When we discussed formal flexibility – rather than informal arrangements at the discretion of department managers – leaders worried about loss of control. How would they know if staff members were actually working? How would they monitor progress? Certainly, these conversations were disappointing. Why were we stuck in this organizational rut, with dedication still being measured by face-time? Meanwhile, in every other sector, telecommuting and digital communications were the hallmarks of innovative workplaces, where performance was appraised by measurable outcomes.

We had to honor the resistance, understanding that internal change can be difficult for mission-driven organization because it can be perceived as a distraction from external goals. We persisted – presenting, educating, and advocating. We also were fortunate to have a few CEOs and Human Resource Directors who made the shift early on and agreed to partner with us as peers to their colleagues in the field.

We came to see our own Jewish values as a bright light that might move the conversation along. Many organizational leaders wanted to align their Jewish values – around family, community, learning and spirituality – with work policies. These values are obvious when considering family leave for a new baby, but they also make sense for staff with spouses, parents, or children

suffering from chronic illness. They also matter if we want to encourage young professionals to pursue graduate degrees or join a Wexner-like Jewish learning program.

Other organizations adopted these policies to strengthen their ability to attract and retain talent and to make professionals feel valued, an element of job satisfaction that ranks high on every employment survey.

Establishing and managing these policies does demand new work structures and an outstanding reliance on collaboration and communication, but the innovations appear to outweigh the difficulties. As these following examples show, the commitment to Jewish values is yielding measurable benefits:

- Over two years, AJWS provided ten staff members with paid parental leave, all of whom returned to their jobs. Through this shift, AJWS achieved significant cost savings and increased organizational capacity. The typical cost for replacement of staff is 150% of annual salary, including recruitment, training and loss of institutional memory and contacts.
- When establishing formal flexibility, UJA-Federation of NY created a system for covering work assignments and tracking results. More than 80 people now have formal flexible work arrangements while continuing to receive promotions and move upward on the career track.
- At B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, Rabbi Felicia Sol successfully advocated for paid parental policy for everyone on staff, from the clergy to the administrative staff.

In each of these cases, there was resistance and anxiety at first. We expected pushback and we got pushback. Why shouldn't we? After all, we live in the one of the very few industrialized countries that does not offer paid maternity leave.

We have thirty-eight organizations to reach in our Campaign goal, and this is just the beginning of the journey. In fact, we along with our partners at Jewish Funders Network are hosting a [work/life convening on November 1st](#), which we expect to be well attended. What if hundreds of Jewish organizations decided to stand on the forefront of the nonprofit sector, by advocating for workplace policies that allow employees – from senior management to the lowest-paid staff member – to pursue high-level performance and fulfill caregiving commitments? When we change the way we work to provide these basic supports, we will strengthen the fabric of our Jewish community and lead the way for the rest of our country.

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