

GENDER EQUALITY

what you can do for your organization's success >> joanna samuels

It's not just about the women, it turns out. The biggest and most pleasant surprise of my work at Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (AWP) is that it affords me a unique window into the inner workings of Jewish communal organizations. Through helping boards to create generous parental leave policies, coaching women on how to negotiate more effectively, and mentoring men on ways to bring action to their beliefs in gender equity and shared leadership, I have learned a lot about the Jewish communal sector and about the role of organizational culture in making change. But it starts with women and their allies.

Savvy and idealistic professionals, female and male, are intent on effecting change in their workplaces from wherever they are on the organizational chart. The good news? Many Jewish organizations are listening. In the past 24 months, more than 40 organizations have signed on to AWP's Better Work Better Life Campaign, either adopting a generous paid parental leave policy or formalized flexible work arrangements for their employees. In the same time period, women have become the top professionals at prominent foundations, social justice organizations, and at two large-city Jewish Federations. Dozens of male leaders have signed AWP's pledge not to appear on or convene all-male public forums at Jewish communal conferences. The people that helped to make these changes work in a diverse sampling of the Jewish com-

munal sector—from start-up to institutional stronghold, from a three-person staff to a 500-person staff, from arts incubators to social services agencies.

the issue of parental leave for staff, and have boards, C-suites, and public programs that are almost entirely male. Employees at these organizations who do raise issues about gender equity feel paranoid or subtly punished for having done so.

The not-so-surprising difference I observe between the “good news” and “not-so-good news” organizations is that their success on the gender equity front correlates to their overall organizational success. Those in the former category tend to be organizations that are thriving or are poised to thrive. They successfully reinvent themselves to impact a shrinking communal landscape. The latter organizations, uncertain of where they fit in a changed Jewish community, are struggling to understand their core mission.

What a coincidence—or not. The skills that the “good news” organizations utilize when they make difficult changes to level the playing field between women and men are the very same skills that enable them to do the adaptive work of leadership in an uncertain and competitive field. The challenge is to reimagine what a leader looks like, how a leader should be compensated, and what dynamism, success, or tradition looks like. The ability to engage and work toward sustainable answers to these challenges requires creativity, courage, and the ability to live with uncertainty.

Conversely, when organizational leaders either explicitly or subtly shut down conversations that might help move their organiza-

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tions toward greater gender equity, they are silencing the very voices that will help seed their success. When leaders repeatedly answer difficult questions with responses like “women don't WANT the jobs” or “women are not as good at fundraising” or “we cannot afford to give our employees parental leave,” they are revealing a failure to utilize creativity and courage. Is it any wonder that the organizations that they lead are suffering for lack of

these very same qualities?

One recommendation that I have for communal leaders is to listen carefully when a conversation related to gender arises. Adaptive changes take time and work to implement. The capacity to respond truly to the issues at hand reveals a tremendous amount about oneself and the organization. Idealistic and savvy employees should begin workplace conversations about gender and effectiveness. Yes, it takes courage to create the tension that conversations about gender usually bring about. But that's leadership: the capacity to create disequilibrium for the sake of values that you care about and to ride out the challenging moments.



By Yaron Goldfarb. www.artomanut.com.

All of our organizations can improve. When both leaders and staff people see that equity and effectiveness are linked, then they will welcome conversations about women's roles, the nature of work, and how to live out values through actions. Not because there are easy solutions to these challenges—but because working toward making our organizations healthier and more effective on the gender equity front will result in organizations that are healthier and more effective on every front. **PT**

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Rabbi Joanna Samuels is director of strategic initiatives at Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community.