

On Family, Walk the Talk – The Jewish Daily Forward

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Editorial

Before Jerry Silverman became president and CEO of Jewish Federations of North America, before he worked for another national Jewish nonprofit, he was a leader in the business world. At Levi Strauss & Co. and the Stride Rite Corp., he saw the private-sector experiment with ways to recruit and retain employees concerned about balancing work and family. By instituting policies promoting family leave and flexible work arrangements, he said that employees “were extraordinarily more productive and committed.”

Now he’s doing that in the Jewish nonprofit world.

JFNA is the latest, and one of the most prominent, Jewish communal organizations to move into the 21st century by adopting policies that make finding that elusive work-life balance a little easier for its 180 full-time employees. New mothers can receive up to 12 weeks paid maternity leave, depending on length of service, and fathers and adoptive parents may receive up to 20 days paid leave, with health benefits remaining intact.

Also new is a policy promoting what’s being called “formal flexibility” — allowing employees to telecommute from home, or to work outside of the standard daytime schedule. While some of the arrangements were made ad hoc in the past, the formal policy codifies the offerings, taking them away from the whims of particular managers and ensuring that all employees are aware of the possibilities.

“It’s the right thing to do from a Jewish values point of view. It’s also the right thing to do to set a standard for the community,” Silverman told the Forward. “When you’re looking at what we stand for, who we are as a people, we really need to walk the talk.”

JFNA becomes the 42nd Jewish agency to sign onto a campaign by Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community to improve work-life policies. The goal: 100 organizations.

Getting there is obviously a challenge, but also an imperative. The absence of work-life policies is connected to the appalling gender gap that exists in Jewish communal life, where the vast majority of workers — but very, very few leaders — are women.

Silverman, for one, understands the dynamic: “We need to create a culture where being able to have a rich, robust personal life is celebrated with the same fervor as having an intense and responsible position.”

Fifty-eight more to go.