

THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR IN A SYNAGOGUE TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

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We should rather be working harder at providing experiences of meaning and community, ideally together. That task requires reimagining the tradition in ways that speak profoundly to the minds and hearts of American Jews as they actually are, and redesigning our community to meet the needs they have rather than the needs which rabbis or federations think they should have... The point is to fashion a community that helps Jews live rightly and live well without abandoning full participation in American society, and to describe a Judaism that assists their quest for wholeness and transcendence.

Arnold Eisen, Taking Hold of Torah, p xii

Eisen lays out the rationale for “synagogue transformation,” possibly the “new buzzword for the millennium”¹ according to Isa Aron, Professor of Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School. Aron is one of the leading proponents and planners of nationwide efforts to re-envision our synagogue communities in order to forge and sustain meaningful connections between synagogue and congregant. While much has been written about the different versions of synagogue transformation, including the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), also known as the Learning Congregation Project (LCP), Creating a Learning Congregation (CLC) and Synagogue 2000 (S2K), the roles played in these projects by individual synagogue professionals has not been well-documented. Many of the writings and the training materials relate

¹ Aron, Isa, Minding the Process in Transformational Change, CCAR Journal, Winter 1998

specifically to clergy and lay leaders and, to a lesser degree, Synagogue Educators. None of these documents address the integration and involvement of synagogue Executive Directors in transformational efforts.

As the Executive Director of Temple B'nai Torah, I was a primary player in that congregation's attempt to undertake synagogue transformation. The experience had a significant impact upon me personally and professionally. I believe that the ways in which Temple Administrators (I will use Administrator and Executive Director interchangeably) have or have not been welcomed into their temples' transformation projects offer lessons for our profession and for the Reform Movement as it seeks to enact the goals adopted in the 1999 Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism. The insights shared by colleagues whose synagogues participated in ECE, LCP, CLC, S2K or programs specific to their own congregation help to illustrate how their leadership in change efforts can benefit both the congregation and the individual Administrator.

The Changing Nature of the Synagogue Community

The center of local community life for the average Jewishly active individual, however, continued to be the synagogue. Far from serving exclusively or perhaps even primarily as a place of worship, the synagogue, especially in suburban areas, provided such varied services as Jewish education for children and adults, men's clubs, sisterhoods, youth and sport groups, social service, and catering private social affairs.

Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 5, pp. 830-831

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, in Finding a Spiritual Home, calls the synagogue described above the Synagogue-Center and critiques it as unable to meet the inner spiritual needs of today's Jews. Instead, he proposes that we change to become synagogue-communities; with clearly articulated missions that help individual Jews

decide if that synagogue can effectively meet their spiritual, educational and community needs.² Aron, in her 2002 book The Self-Renewing Congregation, gives a short but clear review of the changing nature of synagogues in Jewish history and especially in America. She notes that synagogues have evolved through 2000 years of Jewish experience, from the days of the First and Second Temples into the Diaspora. Changes in synagogue life in America happened more quickly (or perhaps with more available documentation) and Aron details both the benefits and the limitations of the Synagogue-Center.³

In a nation in which Jews were a distinct but generally accepted minority, the concept of a single location for education, worship and community connections made sense. Jews in the middle years of the 20th Century took pride in their synagogues, saw them as effective Jewish counterpoints to the hundreds of churches dotting our cities and towns, and as the means to create individualized Jewish identities based on their affiliations.

On the other hand, the size, impersonality, and apparent lack of focus on Judaism (as opposed to “being Jewish”) within the Synagogue-Center led to disenchantment among second and third generation temple members. Eisen stresses the voluntary character of our American Jewish community. He calls it a “principal weakness, but a potential strength as well.” “The ‘American Jewish community’ is itself a fiction of that sort...Synagogue membership has steeply declined, and only a tiny fraction of the community comes to synagogue on a weekly basis...Our efforts to build community must be adequate to their [synagogue members] diversity. We must begin with what American

² Schwarz, Sidney, Finding a Spiritual Home, pp 35-46

³ Aron, Isa, The Self-Renewing Congregation, pp 12-17

Jews actually want or need and so would choose. The first step – rarely taken by synagogues – is to ask them.”⁴

The synagogue transformation projects mentioned above, as well as programs that have been developed by individual Temples for their own purposes, are predicated on some level of agreement with Schwarz, Aron and Eisen. Eisen’s advice that synagogues should ask congregants what they need or want is a key strategy meant to turn an otherwise “top-down” process into something more democratic and representative of congregational diversity.

Despite this intention, however, the projects all begin with a more select group of leaders (teams or task forces) sharing a common hope that their efforts can lead to strengthened bonds amongst individuals and between our members and their personal Jewish commitments. The CLC materials provided at the 1999 UAHC National Biennial are indicative of the overall goals set for (or by) project leadership:

- Challenge synagogues to think deeply about the kind of communities they want to be and design effective ways to move toward their goals.
- Foster visionary thinking that is both innovative and rooted in tradition.
- Create a mature partnership between lay and professional synagogue leaders.
- Bring Jewish values and text sources into dialogue with the practical wisdom of organizational development and change.

For Temple Administrators, each of these goals carries a unique directive. Our jobs demand that we look at all Temple activities in terms of immediate and future impact. “Mature partnerships” are critical to getting anything done within an organizational structure, regardless of what that organization may be. And connecting our Judaism to the practical world of group dynamics, finances, leadership development,

⁴ Eisen, Arnold M., Taking Hold of Torah, pp 91-92

and interpersonal relationships is the skill that sets synagogue directors apart from corporate CEO's and other non-profit directors.

By examining how synagogues involved in transformative change efforts have integrated Administrators into the process, we can learn how Executive Directors can further the nation-wide movement towards congregational self-review and –renewal. While the success of these efforts or lack thereof is always due to many different elements, the role an Executive Director plays can become an important factor.

An Overview of the Levels of Involvement of Executive Directors

*This is the generation and those who seek its welfare.” (Psalms 24:6) R. Judah (II) The Patriarch and the sages differed about this matter. According to one opinion, the character of a generation is determined by its leaders. According to the other opinion, the character of the leader is determined by the generation.
Babylonian Talmud, Arakhin 17A*

So it appears to be with the role of Executive Directors in synagogue transformation projects. The symbiotic relationship that exists between Rabbis and their congregants (leaders and generations) is replayed in different degree between Directors and their Temple leadership and members.

Just as the evolution and outcomes of transformational efforts are dependent upon the personalities of the leading individuals and the congregational dynamics, so the participation of Administrators in these projects has varied. Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph (Profession or Jewish Education and Leadership Development, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati) and Linda Klonsky (S2K Director of Change Initiatives) both state that, in their experience, the role of an Executive Director in a transformational effort mirrored that person's role in the broader work of the congregation. Those directors who have a strong, confidante-

type relationship with the Senior Rabbi, for instance, are more likely to be fully integrated into the top leadership of the change process. Conversely, those Directors who are seen by their lay leadership and clergy as “administrative” are not as welcomed or are limited in their participation.

In discussions with colleagues whose synagogues engaged in S2K, ECE, LCP or an individualized transformation effort, I identified three general but distinct levels of participation.

1. **Tangential:** Involved only peripherally and viewed solely as “administrative” rather than substantive staff
2. **Administrative:** Called in on an issue-by-issue basis to address areas of concern that fall uniquely into the orbit of the Executive Director (finances, membership recruitment, facilities needs)
3. **Collaborative:** Integrated fully into the leadership that planned the transformational effort

Those Directors who have been involved only tangentially and even those who have been brought into a process solely to offer advice in a special area of expertise reflected frustration, sadness, and concern about their roles. For these, the “transformative” opportunities were strictly limited to whatever broader impact the project had on the congregation. In some cases, the project created more work for the Executive Director, especially in terms of allocation of staff resources, without any of the satisfaction of stronger interpersonal relationships, study, and respect for their perspectives about the synagogue’s needs, all of which are desired outcomes of synagogue transformational projects.

The projects themselves could lack valuable input by not including Executive Directors. By the nature of our jobs, we have a global awareness of the diversity and alternating currents within the full membership. By not incorporating this professional in

their deliberations, the leadership may be more likely to maintain a narrower and more exclusive focus. In several cases, I heard the Leadership Team or Task Force referred to as a “clique”, clearly expressing a de facto separation between the leadership and the general congregant body. For transformation to be successful, even if it begins “top-down”, the leadership must continually reach out and test assumptions and plans. The Executive Director is the best-placed professional in the Temple to plan and oversee this outreach.

For those Directors who are seen as “Administrative”, involved but primarily to the extent that they are invited to share their own expertise, the level of personal satisfaction with the project was higher. They had a clearer understanding of what the project sought to accomplish and how successful it would be. At the same time, as informed observers, they could see the internal political problems that transformational projects can create. They could see both the “clique” phenomenon and the potential for conflicting leadership philosophies. They were able to identify ways in which lay leadership were heading in opposite directions from the clergy – watching a potential train wreck waiting to happen. To the extent that Executive Directors facilitate the interactions of a myriad of groups and interests, they have skills that could promote understanding and identify points of mutual interest. In this category, however, they were rarely given the opportunity to do so.

Executive Directors who were viewed as “Collaborative” and incorporated into the leadership of their projects from the beginning generally expressed satisfaction and pride in what could be accomplished. They spoke of personal growth, especially in terms

of their own spirituality and appreciation for worship. (This is in part because the S2K-UAHC cohort focused on enhancing worship.)

Through their significant involvement in the process, these Directors carved out an additional focus as a necessary complement to worship changes. Creating a welcoming community is a logical point of concern for Executive Directors. Administrators are highly conscious of the problems of non-involvement, peripheral membership and drop-off parents, especially in larger Temples. They are aware too that successful changes usually require one-on-one coaching and individualized attention. Several of the Directors I surveyed were able to add a vital dimension to the transformation project by crafting new initiatives for welcoming and integration. These actions, as well as the time the Directors invested in the project, led to greater respect and understanding between the Directors and their lay leadership.

A Case Study: Project Kehillah at Temple B'nai Torah, Bellevue, WA

Successful synagogues now must work with a population seeking spiritual meaning and personally transformative insights from the wisdom of Jewish traditions. Ultimately, synagogue transformation depends on and leads to personal transformation of individuals.

*Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Forward p. x
Becoming a Congregation of Learners*

In December 1999, a team of professionals and lay leaders from Temple B'nai Torah attended the UAHC Biennial in Orlando, FL. They were the congregation's representatives at a unique track of learning and leadership development workshops entitled "Creating a Learning Congregation" (CLC). One of ten congregations accepted into this program, the leadership of Temple B'nai Torah was making a commitment to examine critically its mission, programs, structure, and ultimate purpose. Our Temple

President initiated our participation. She had a vision of how the Temple could be “transformed” and she cajoled, encouraged, even twisted some arms to get the Board and most importantly the Senior Rabbi to embrace a process for in-depth changes.

The team consisted of the Senior Rabbi, President, First Vice-President, Treasurer, the chairs of the Worship and Education Committees and me. Despite the project’s title “Creating a Learning Congregation”, there was no distinction made by the Temple’s leadership between my contributions as Executive Director and those of the chair of the Education Committee. In fact, because coincidentally the Temple was also on placement for a new Educator, my role as staff leader assumed even greater importance.

The CLC training sessions provided a mix of text study, case histories, leadership development exercises and step-by-step instructions for “visioning”. Only two of the ten congregations present had Executive Directors on our teams. Either the others did not have full-time administrators or they chose not to be involved. The introductory remarks of the trainers identified the key players in CLC strategy to be the Senior Rabbi, Educator and the lay leadership, especially the President. Although I raised questions about the omission of Administrator as a partner in the process, the focus clearly did not include an awareness of the unique role that an Administrator could play in successfully achieving transformative change.

In the years since our CLC training in Orlando, my role in Temple B’nai Torah’s attempts to plan and implement a community-building visioning program was broad and deep. When the team returned to Bellevue, WA, the leadership was immediately pulled away from CLC follow-up into the search for a new Educator and an Assistant Rabbi.

For nearly a year, the CLC concept languished while other issues took priority. In the fall of 2000, the team felt the time was right to revisit the concepts. With a new Assistant Rabbi on board, we had an additional staff voice of encouragement and enthusiasm. (NOTE: At the same time, the leadership chose to rename our educational department the “Beit Midrash” and the Assistant Rabbi became the Dean of the Beit Midrash.)

Rabbi Elliot Kleinman, our original CLC advisor, came to address a gathering of our Board, staff, and other key lay activists. He presented a recommended timeline, descriptions of successful CLC processes, and exercises to clarify our long and short-term goals. Following his visit, the Senior Staff (Senior Rabbi, Assistant Rabbi, Cantor, Program Director and myself) agreed to move forward on a visioning and community building project, with the Assistant Rabbi and me in the lead.

While placing the Executive Director in the lead of a transformation project was unusual by CLC standards, it made sense. As the person who provides staff support to the Board, Finance, Programs, Membership and Involvement, and Capital Projects Committees as well as an array of specialized Task Forces and Ad Hoc groups, I had built working relationships with the widest range of Temple members. I knew their skills, personal interests, and general availability. In addition and probably more important, as the “buck stops here” desk for Temple management, I was privy to more complaints, hopes, goals, disappointments, personal sorties, and Jewish journeys than any other single staff person. I was aware of the range of satisfaction and dissatisfaction that would underpin a movement for transformational change or obstruct it.

The Assistant Rabbi and I planned which lay leaders to invite on the Leadership Team (often referred to as the Core Group) and we met individually with our four

choices. Then the six of us embarked on our own unique regimen of study and personal sharing, and we sought to articulate why we thought Temple B'nai Torah was ready for transformative change and how we might bring it about. (NOTE: Notably missing from our early consensus was the “what” of that change and therein lay one of the ultimate challenges to our project. Since this Thesis is primarily about the processes rather than the outcomes of various transformational projects, I chose not to describe the finished product and how we got to it at this time.)

The Leadership Team spent four months meeting bi-weekly, studying together and sharing our own “journeys”. We began each meeting with a D’var Torah – rotating that responsibility amongst us. The choice to not rely on the Rabbi for Torah wisdom and to use the parsha as a reference for our team’s sacred work set this process apart from standard committee “meetings”. Sharing the role of Rav and applying our learning to our tasks for each session accomplished several goals. We developed a strong sense of equality; the six of us found that collaboration got us further than hierarchy. With rotational leadership, each of us built skills and learned personal strengths that were not seen as part of our usual roles. As the Executive Director, I was able to move beyond logistics, finances, and practical applications into the more abstract realm of long-term Temple needs and goals. I found an outlet for my own concerns about unmet potential in our congregation without the common directorial requirement to “find a solution to fix the problem.”

Our study together bonded the group and we crafted a presentation to the Temple Executive Committee and Board in January and February 2001. The Board agreed to move forward toward the creation of a larger task force and tasked us to develop a time-

line for deliberation and action. At that point, we still called ourselves CLC but the goals we had articulated did not mesh with that title. The process focused on self-reflection and seeking an overall vision for the Temple with the goals of

- Engaging the synagogue membership in deeper and more meaningful ways
- Developing and enhancing individual Jewish identity and
- Creating a more cohesive Temple community

To better honor those goals, we chose to call ourselves Project Kehillah (PK for short).

Our next step was to create the broader Task Force, using the guidelines provided in the UAHC CLC materials. The Leadership Team identified about thirty individuals to invite onto the Task Force. Naturally, the Senior Rabbi and Cantor were included on the Task Force and were consulted regarding lay people to invite.

The volunteers we identified for inclusion in the Task Force were uniformly excited and intrigued by the potential for spiritual growth and change within Temple B'nai Torah. They represented a cross section of our diverse membership: Jews by choice, marrieds, singles, long-time members and new members, gays, straights, urban, suburban, parents with young children, individuals who have been deeply involved and those who have been peripherally committed. Because of my personal experience with a greater number of Temple members, I was able to offer valuable information about who to enlist. Yet, because the core group was already such a strong team, I knew that my viewpoint would be honored but not allowed to dictate direction based on personal prejudices.

As the Leadership Team began to plan our first Task Force meeting, we sought to apply the same growth experiences we had already used:

- Shared journeys
- Rotating leadership roles
- Equality
- Collaborative discussion and decision-making
- Torah study that guided and reflected the curriculum for each session

We prepared exercises and at each meeting sent home “homework assignments” to help frame the next meeting’s focus. Our plan was ambitious. Looking at it two years later, it was manifestly over-ambitious, yet for seven months the PK Task Force studied, read, laughed, shared, and challenged all of us to examine what Temple B’nai Torah had been and what we could become.

Each meeting began with dinner. Making Motzi, breaking bread together provided a social time for the Task Force individuals to get to know each other. After our meal, one of the Leadership Team offered a D’var Torah and then explained our plan and goals for the evening. Individual breakouts for more intimate discussions were always part of the agenda and for each session, we arranged the tables and chairs differently. We sought as much as possible to differentiate our PK get-togethers from standard Temple committee meetings. At each session, each member of the Core Group led a specific discussion, enabling us to create individual broad-based identities for the 20 Task Force participants who might know us only from our titles or our previous leadership functions.

Through this process, my roles as Team leader/member and Executive Director seesawed. At times, I was an equal participant, sharing my personal journey, learning more about my fellow PK colleagues, seeking consensus about a new vision for the

congregation and how to construct it with maximum congregational input. At other times, I was the Professional Staff, questioning the practicality of certain approaches and responding to proposals with the old standards: “Oh, we’ve tried that before and it doesn’t work” and “We’ve always done it this way.” The warmth of the Task Force setting, the humor, the sharing of our personal dreams and Jewish gifts, enabled me to move beyond the routine directorial responses into more visionary and innovative thinking.

My own evolution was best articulated in my D'var Torah based on Rabbi Larry Kushner’s article “The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations.”⁵ The theme of that month’s session was the *History and Evolution of Reform Judaism* with an eye towards beginning the visioning process over the summer.

TENT PEGS AS SACRED WORK -- June 21, 2001

I asked to give a D’var Torah tonight because I found the ending of the Tent Pegs article to be so relevant to me and my role here at the Temple. When I introduce myself as the Executive Director of a synagogue, invariably the follow-up question is: what does that mean? My quick & dirty answer is “chief cook & bottle-washer.” But that is an answer that is neither satisfying to me and my own feelings of worth, nor is it an accurate depiction of what I and other “administrative” people do at, for, and with Temple B'nai Torah.

Just as the tabernacle could not have been built without each individual’s contribution – neither can Temple B'nai Torah be a place of spiritual warmth, communal welcome, and unlimited learning without the personal commitment, talents, insight, skills, hard work of each of the individuals who make up our Temple family.

I believe that God has given each of us our own set of such skills and capabilities because God knew that the world he or she created was way too complicated to function with only the talents that one person or a few people might have. We can’t all be gourmet chefs – some people

⁵ Kushner, Lawrence, *The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations*, *New Traditions: Explorations in Judaism*, Spring 1988

have to have the ability to craft the pots and pans, to build the stoves and refrigerators, to grow the basic ingredients.

Our Temple is God's creation, and within our family, God has placed a cornucopia of talent and brilliance. That in our society some aspects of that brilliance or some of those talents are not given as high a stature (or paycheck) as others is, perhaps, a reflection of how far our society is from God's ideal. But maybe, with our energy and our work in Project Kehillah, we can help to strengthen that ideal in our own Temple community so that, in truth, "the one who made the Holy Ark itself cannot feel superior to the one who made only the courtyard tent pegs."

I wrote this after I had been questioned about how I, an Administrator, could assume the role of long-range planner and visionary. At the same time, I was becoming increasingly aware that the time demands of Project Kehillah were forcing me to make choices about my more typical directorial responsibilities. Is it possible to be immersed in a transformation process and still oversee all of the administration details that routinely require my attention? Conversely, is it possible to effectively accomplish those administrative responsibilities that prevail in my job description without integral involvement in the congregation's developmental journey towards greater communal connection and spirituality?

This apparent discord between roles is not unusual. In conversations with other Executive Directors engaged actively in their synagogues' transformation projects, the same themes played. We were grateful for and valued the times in Task Force or S2K Team sessions when our thoughts and inspirations were greeted as though we were simply "of the people." We sought to distribute the routine organizational tasks among the lay people so that we would not always be the cooks and bottle washers. Often though, we were expected or needed to morph into our Directorial identities: raising

practical or budgetary concerns, playing “devil’s advocate” because of our more intimate knowledge of the conflicting currents within the congregation.

For me, the confluence of the two roles was a challenge but also a wonderful opportunity to educate our lay leaders about the multi-faceted job of the Executive Director. Several of my colleagues echoed this perspective. They gained both personally and professionally in respect and credit for the breadth of expertise they exhibited as synagogue visionaries and as functionaries.

The Benefits of Executive Director Involvement

“The Lord testeth the righteous.” (Psalms 11:5) God tested David by making him pasture sheep. God saw that David knew to keep some lambs separate from others. “He [David] would lead out the lambs and let them feed on the upper part of the herbage. He would then lead out the old ewes and let them feed on the middle part of the herbage; and finally he would lead out the rams and let them feed on the stubble of the herbage. Accordingly the Holy One said: Seeing that David knows how to feed the sheep, each according to its capacity, let him come and feed My sheep, the people of Israel, as is said, ‘From following the ewes that give suck, He brought him to be shepherd over Jacob His people.’ (Psalms 78:71)

Extrapolated from Exodus Rabbah 2:2; Midrash Tehillim 78:21; Yalkut, Psalms, section 883

Executive Directors often know the individual needs, interests, and abilities of their congregants better than any other staff. By treating each member and each diverse constituency with sensitivity to their concerns, Executive Directors can be effective shepherds for synagogue change efforts. Their leadership can further the goals of the project; their absence can hinder its progress.

The Encyclopedia Judaica states, “The structure of contemporary Jewish communities is best understood as a multidimensional matrix (or mosaic) that takes the

form of a communications network; a set of interacting institutions which, while preserving their own structural integrity and roles, is informed by shared patterns of culture, activated by a shared system of organizations, and governed by shared leadership cadres.”⁶

A synagogue is a microcosm of this matrix and the professional staff – clergy, Administrator, Educator – join with the lay activists to be the “shared leadership cadre.” The role of the Administrator as the “nerve center of all congregational activities”⁷ places this person in a unique position to oversee the goals articulated by the CLC process. Whether the synagogue is undertaking transformative change within a formal national program or doing so as part of its own growth and development, the Executive Director acts as a Back Stage Coordinator. At times, s/he is a supporting cast member; at times totally behind the scenes.

The Executive Director knows what changes will be easy to make and what will take greater effort. S/he can identify the core values of the congregation or can clarify that there is not consensus within the congregation regarding those core values. The implementation of any changes will vary dramatically if there is not buy-in from the broader membership. An Administrator, placed in a facilitative/connective role, is able to see the challenges and to act as the brake on the plans of a dedicated but exclusive group represented within the project’s Task Force or Team. Just as a Board of Directors may query the wisdom of a committee’s proposal and send it back to a committee for retooling, so the Executive Director can represent alternative perspectives to the project’s

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica , Volume 5, p. 852

⁷ Katz, Irving I. & Schoen, Myron E., Successful Synagogue Administration, p. 188

leadership, thereby helping to nurture broader discussion about the kind of community the congregation can become.

Within the leadership team, itself, there is generally a wide scope of skills. Executive Directors can serve as effective evaluators of those skills and by being an ongoing participant in the team's discussions, the Director can identify appropriate roles of current and future involvement for the individual members.

Most of the Directors I queried noted that the clearest positive outcome from their transformational projects was enhanced leadership development. I found that the PK Task Force was a phenomenal breeding ground for new Board and Committee leaders. In fact, the year after the Task Force engaged in its most intensive work, three Task Force members came onto our Board of Directors. In each case, we shared a relationship of greater depth and personal as well as professional insight than is often the case with new Board recruits.

The collaborative work style necessary for a successful transformational project also leads to greater understanding of the complexity of the position of Executive Director. Whether it is something as mundane as figuring out how to participate substantively in a discussion while cleaning up the remains of dinner or as fundamental to the project's outcome as training volunteers to undertake community outreach, my lay colleagues and the clergy better realized the value of juggling the routine with the visionary to achieve a common goal.

Finally, the relationships that were built through my leadership and that of my colleagues in their own projects gave far greater credence to the practical wisdom that we offered. When we needed to express a logistical or a budgetary concern, we were not

soundly booed as the naysayers but rather respected for our appreciation of the global picture.

For Administrators who were fully integrated into their transformation projects, the positive effects on them personally and professionally can be summarized as:

- Greater respect from the lay leadership for the depth and breadth of an Executive Director's knowledge and the complexities of his/her job
- Stronger relationships between the Executive Director and newly involved congregants either as members of the Leadership Team or as increasingly connected activists
- Identification of leaders for committees and the Board and stronger existing relationships that ultimately can lead to more effective Board-Staff cooperation
- Increased lay understanding of and commitment to some of the "nuts and bolts" work that is required to implement the abstract goals of the project

For the Directors who were involved from the beginning in planning the agenda, the resulting work of implementation was not "thrust upon them" but was chosen and designed with all the necessary reality checks (budget, time, space). For those Directors, their lay leadership recognized and acknowledged that our jobs too are "to bring the coming of the Messiah," as Rabbi Joseph described it, to our congregants.

Barriers to Full Directorial Participation

And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tent of meeting that they may stand there with thee...and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.'

Numbers 11:17

The challenges to substantial Executive Director involvement in synagogue transformation come from three sources: Executive Directors ourselves and our own

perspectives and historical behavior; the view that clergy and Educators have that Executive Directors are primarily managers and not “Judaic”; and the perspective of lay leaders that Directors are all about logistics and practicalities and can’t be visionaries.

Taking Klonsky’s and Joseph’s views that Administrators in synagogue change mirror their actions in other aspects of synagogue life, we as Executive Directors need to carefully examine our roles as Temple leaders. Increasingly, NATA has sought to enhance the internal and external awareness of Administrators has substantive senior staff, rather than solely processors. Individually many of us are bringing home the lessons NATA and seeking to implement them.

Even with the teachings from NATA, many Administrators make a studied choice not be involved in transformation projects because they cannot add any more work to their already crowded job descriptions. Additional meetings, often on weekends or evenings, “homework” and the attendant phone calls and emails of yet another committee can be daunting when piled on top of existing responsibilities. Also, administrators have expressed concern that when they do participate, they’ll be pigeon-holed as staff support – ordering meals, making copies, coordinating communications, etc. Lay leaders have a tendency to see Executive Directors as employees and, especially when a Director is skilled and responsive to the logistical demands, the leadership expects that role to continue. For overachievers, this is double-edged sword: because of our historical competence, we are expected to do what we usually do plus whatever extra tasks are required by the project.

Interestingly, when administrators either choose to step away from primary involvement or are locked out by virtue of a narrow interpretation of the job, they can

become barriers to the success of the project. Despite a perception of Executive Directors as finance and administrative managers, we are often the first and ongoing conduit of communications and welcome to our members. How can we answer congregants' questions about "what's going on" if we are not involved in the conversations and rationales that are guiding the changes? How can we liaison between the more exclusive group of Project leaders and the general membership if we are not connected effectively to both? Finally, how can we oversee the implementation of change strategies if they have been determined without any of our practical knowledge and input?

While NATA as a professional association has increasingly focused our annual convention discussions on ways to enhance Administrator standing within the movement, the other professional bodies with the UAHC may not have connected to these same teachings. Consequently, even as we try to implement an expanded focus for our work, our professional colleagues may not share the view of synagogue Directors as equal partners in Temple leadership. The lack of recognition in the literature about synagogue change of the unique role of Directors acts as a barrier for clergy and lay leaders who have not collaborated effectively with their Administrators.

Several colleagues in my survey related that their involvement in transformative changes was more welcomed when the synagogue project was not related to one of the national programs. In those instances, the Executive Director was more likely to be tapped as a critical resource from the very beginning. A homegrown effort will mirror the routine relationship among lay, clergy, and Director, but, in order to work (or perhaps even get off the ground), the practical management skills of the Administrator are often

needed immediately. For the Administrator, the challenge is always to exceed the managerial expectations and exert leadership. In some congregations, this in itself will be a change from the usual order. However, since the current dynamic of the national transformational programs does not assume a key leadership position for the Executive Director, it has been easier for some Directors to show leadership in a more independent setting.

Lessons for the Future

Throughout our history, we Jews have remained firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, even as we have learned much from our encounters with other cultures. The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.

*A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism,
Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention
Central Conference of American Rabbis
May 1999 – Sivan 5759*

As the Reform Movement continues to evolve towards greater acceptance of and implementation of the 1999 Platform, efforts to “transform” individual synagogues will proceed. Many of these efforts will not fall under the rubric of nationally organized projects such as S2K. Instead, individual leaders – clergy and/or other professional staff, lay activists – will initiate programs and systems to address unique concerns. The overarching goal is likely to be stronger connections between congregants and the primary synagogue roles of Beit Tefilah, Beit Knesset, and Beit Midrash.

Each synagogue has a unique culture that defines its working relationships. For any major change efforts to be successful, those relationships must be understood and honored. Yet, within such an effort, those relationships are likely to go through changes

themselves. As a profession, we can improve the chances of success within our Temples by better training ourselves to be leaders and to articulate to our clergy and lay people that we have a substantive leadership role to play.

Initially, for some of us, this will have to manifest itself in smaller, less dramatic areas of work. Initiating and overseeing discrete programs for membership involvement or in social action are good first steps towards breaking through the wall of limited expectations. Creating a leadership identity extends to every area of synagogue administrative life: from turning budget discussions into values-based decisions to setting a standard of *derech erez* in the treatment of staff and volunteers. It is valuable to our level of respect that we name this work to ourselves and to our leadership.

Isa Aron, in *The Self-Renewing Congregation*, creates a fictional conversation in a fictional synagogue concerning the draft of a Congregational Learning Brochure for the coming year.⁸ The fictional participants include the Synagogue Administrator, Senior Rabbi, Assistant Rabbi, Cantor, Synagogue Educator and Adult Education Co-Chairs. Aron imagines each of these players fitting into clearly recognizable (and not very positive) stereotypes. Each player in this script speaks with apparently limited interest in the substance of the project, let alone any creative new ideas. All of the speakers are on “automatic pilot” based on their own stereotypically traditional roles within the dynamic of the synagogue.

The Administrator in this drama speaks three times. The only issues of interest to this player are printing schedules and deadlines. The stereotype articulated is of a manager who cares about nothing except logistics and form. The experiences of many Administrators in leading their congregations through transformative change illustrate

⁸ Aron, Isa, *The Self-Renewing Congregation*, pp 24-26

that Aron's caricature of our job is outdated and inaccurate. Yet, unless this stereotype is challenged with the Reform Movement, Executive Directors will be limited in how much we can affect ongoing programs and ultimately synagogue change.

To complement our profession's efforts to grow towards equal partnership, the Reform Movement's other professional staff bodies, the CCAR, ACC, and NATE as well as the UAHC and HUC staff, can refocus their traditional thinking about the profession of Temple Administrator. When Administrators are no longer sorted solely into managerial slots, the most skilled and dedicated among us will be able to effectively share our visions and gifts. With a common bond of mutual goals and responsibilities for the revitalization of our synagogues, the clergy, Director, and lay leaders can be a strong and united force in guiding our congregations towards those goals.

My thanks to the following colleagues, advisors, and scholars who shared their wisdom and experience with me.

Gary Cohn, Executive Director, Temple Emanu-El, San Francisco, CA

Roy Feinberg, Executive Director, Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia, PA

Rabbi David Fine, Regional Director, Pacific NW Region, UAHC, Seattle, WA

Ann Finkelstein, Executive Director, Westchester Reform Temple, Scarsdale, NY

Susanne Geshekter, Executive Director, Temple Emanu-El, San Diego, CA

Dale Glasser, Director, Dept. of Synagogue Management, UAHC, New York, NY

Lynne Goldberg, Executive Director, Temple B'rith Kodesh, Rochester, NY

Jeff Herzog, Executive Director, Rodef Shalom Congregation, Pittsburgh, PA

Bob Isaacs, Executive Director, Temple Shalom of Newton, West Newton, MA

Mark Jacobson, Executive Director, The Temple, Atlanta, GA

Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, Professor of Jewish Education and Leadership
Development, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati

Rabbi Elliott Kleinman, Director of Program, UAHC, New York, NY

Linda Klonsky, Director of Change Initiatives, Synagogue 2000

Jeanne Kort, Executive Director, Congregation Beth Torah, Overland Park, KS

Rabbi Michael A. Latz, Assistant Rabbi, Temple B'nai Torah, Bellevue, WA

Hilary Leboff, Executive Director, Shir Ami, Newtown, PA

Rabbi James L. Mirel, Senior Rabbi, Temple B'nai Torah, Bellevue, WA

Cantor David Serkin-Poole, Temple B'nai Torah, Bellevue, WA

Dan Soyer, Executive Director, Temple Israel, Boston, MA

Leslie Sporn, Executive Director, Temple Sharey Tefilo Israel, South Orange,
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Rabbi Sue Anne Wasserman, Commission on Religious Living, UAHC, New
York, NY

Jane Zuckerman, Executive Director, Temple Israel of Hollywood, Los Angeles,
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APPENDIX I SURVEY QUESTIONS/ISSUES

What is the size of your congregation?

300-600 600-900 900-1500 1500+

In what, if any, organized program did your congregation participate?

ECE LCP CLC Synagogue 2000 Other

Was there support from a national body?

UAHC Synagogue 2000 Other

What form did that support take?

On-site advisor	Email
Distance advisor	Materials
Telephone	Training
Travel	Other

Did this support help your congregation's efforts?

A lot Some Made no difference Hindered

Who actually initiated the transformation effort?\

Rabbi	Executive Director
Cantor	Lay Leadership
Educator	Other

What was the issue focus of your congregation's project?

Worship
Education – Children
Education – Adults
Community Building
Social Action
Caring Community
Other

Which staff people led the effort?

Rabbi (or Assistant)	Executive Director/Administrator
Cantor (or Assistant)	Program Director
Educator	Other

How long did the project last?

6 months 12 months 18 months longer still ongoing

If you were involved as the Executive Director, were you part of the leadership from the inception of the project?

If not, when did your involvement start?

¼ way ½ way near the end never

What was your role?

Did other Professional Staff support you in your role? Respond for each staff member for which this is relevant: Rabbi, Cantor, Educator, Program Director, Other

A lot	Not at all
Some	Hindered
Neutral	

How would you describe your role in relationship to that of the primary project leader?

Equal to	administrative support for
substantive support for	other

How would you rate the success of your congregation's project in terms of its original goal?

Highly successful
Somewhat successful
No long term impact
Successful failure (position outcomes but not the goal of the project)
Complete failure (negative impact on some aspect of the congregation)

What other outcomes occurred?

Were they positive negative

Did these outcomes occur instead of or in addition to the original goal?

To what do you attribute these other results?

How did your involvement lead to or impact these conclusions?

What did you learn from your experience?

How did this experience affect your continuing relationships with

Rabbi	Lay Leadership
Cantor	Other
Educator	

Did your role in the project change how you view your own role as Executive Director?

How?

Did your role in the project change your relationship to your Judaism?

How?

Did your role in this project change what was expected of you as an Executive Director by your colleagues or lay leaders?

If you had to do it over again, what would you have changed specifically regarding your participation?

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