

# Reengineering the Jewish Community

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The idea of discussing “Reengineering the Jewish Community” is in accord with a long-standing tradition in North American Jewry. For many years, for better or worse, American Jewish institutions have looked to North American business for ideas on structure and management. So, at a time when Jewish professional and volunteer leaders sense that something is awry with North American Jewish organizational life, it is perfectly understandable that they turn to some of the latest thinking in the business world. Here, the hope is to identify ideas as to how to design a more efficient, more effective, and in a certain sense, a more Jewishly profitable voluntary community.

In theory, the reengineering approach can teach us something about how to reshape organized Jewry. To begin our exploration, we need at least a rudimentary understanding of the concept, for which we can turn to the writings of Michael Hammer of Boston, a leading management expert and, as it so happens, an active and involved Jew who addressed the 1995 Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) General Assembly (Hammer, 1996; Hammer & Stanton, 1995).

Reengineering begins with the view that many current corporate structures are obsolete. Throughout most of the earlier part of this century, North American corporations succeeded grandly by perfecting a style of management and corporate design well-suited for the Industrial Age. They constructed highly bureaucratized and tightly controlled multilayered hierarchies. They broke-up work processes into tiny pieces, allowing them to assign their workers very simple, discrete tasks to perform. They engaged highly trained professional managers, who adhered to well-articulated, detailed, and comprehensive established procedures.

This business organization flourished at a time when producers, not consumers, held the upper hand, a time when a Henry Ford could say with both arrogance and impunity, “Americans can have any color car they want as long as it’s

black.” These corporations ably produced large numbers of similar products for mass markets; that is, markets where millions shared similar tastes and consumers sought to conform rather than to stick out.

Yet now, toward the end of the twentieth century, consumer markets are increasingly differentiated and segmented. Consumers have more choice and more power. They’ve learned to demand more specialized, highly tailored goods and services, along with more personalized attention to their delivery. But, more broadly, rapid change is now endemic, universal, and a constant.

To contend with this highly fluid and dynamic environment, today’s companies need to become more highly efficient and more consumer-oriented. They need to redesign their business processes to dramatically reduce the time and cost of accomplishing their objectives. This redesign is essential for companies whose losses are up or profits way down; but it is even useful (if not eventually essential as well) for successful corporations seeking to stay ahead of the ever-innovating competition. Although Jewish Communal Service Association (JCSA) had called for a discussion of reengineering the Jewish community as a cry of exaggerated distress, reflecting an unwarranted and overly pessimistic view of the community, the desirability for reengineering can also apply to basically healthy situations as well.

## FEATURES OF REENGINEERING

Hammer defines reengineering as “the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements” (Hammer & Stanton, 1995). It is characterized by certain key features, given below.

Reengineering identifies and discards old assumptions. It focuses on business processes, a series of several connected steps that may well take place across several departments within a corporation. Examples include product development, order fulfillment, or handling claims.

It breaks down and reconfigures established organizational structures. Often the prime reason for doing so is to eliminate or sharply reduce the number of transfers of responsibility between organizational divisions. After reengineering takes effect, fewer workers operating out of fewer organizational units are responsible for the same process. Downsizing is not the immediate goal of reengineering, although it often is the sought-after by-product of a successful redesign, one that brings about vastly increased efficiency.

Another key feature of reengineering is that companies become more directly oriented to the customer, rather than requiring the customer to adapt to the structure of the business organization. One common reengineering product is the formation of teams of professionals drawn from different divisions who, as a self-contained group, handle an entire business process from start to finish or provide for all the needs of the customer in one place. Some reengineered companies go further and create the position of “case manager,” a single staffer who manages customers’ relationships with the various parts of the complex corporation.

Reengineering frequently means giving workers more authority and responsibility. In doing so, it demands that workers become more widely competent to handle more diverse tasks. Reengineering often utilizes breakthroughs in information technology.

Lastly, reengineering efforts succeed only if correctly advocated and executed by top leadership—those whose high positions allow them the breadth of vision to discern the system-wide difficulties and who wield the degree of influence to overcome the inevitable objections of those with vested interests in the current organizational design, of whom veteran middle-managers may be the most outstanding type. The reengineering effort requires and engenders an ongoing process of intensive analysis, deliberation, planning, and advocacy on the part of committed, talented, and respected corporate leaders.

## **CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LIFE**

Certainly, the North American Jewish community differs in critical respects from the major corporations that originally fashioned reengineering. The end result of a successful North American Jewry cannot be determined by a year-end profit-and-loss statement. Its objectives are measured in historical, cultural, religious, and transcendental terms. To make matters more difficult, our alternate Jewish ideologies assign different values to different objectives, making the measurement of success even more ambiguous. The managerial inefficiencies that are the target of reengineering may, for the voluntary community, constitute desirable objectives. Consensual decision-making and maximal consultation, even at the expense of efficiency, are generally contrary to the interests of most businesses, but consistent with the mission and culture of most good communities.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the differences between corporations and communities, many useful concepts can be derived from the reengineering approach, and these will now be addressed.

The term “Jewish community” will signify the typical constellation of agencies found at the local level: synagogues, schools, Jewish community centers (JCCs), human-service agencies, the federation, as well as defense agencies, Zionist organizations, fraternal groups, museums, and numerous smaller, innovative endeavors. Reengineering suggests that we subject these institutions, with all their value, strength, and history, to fundamental scrutiny. We need to look at the processes these organizational units perform and see whether we indeed have the best structures to perform those processes.

Just as reengineering begins with an analysis of the changing economic environment, so too must we begin by examining recent changes in the United States and Canada. In fact, the emerging challenges of contemporary Jewish life in many ways resemble the portrait of North American markets, consumers, and corporations offered by the reengineering advocates.

For example, reengineering speaks of an explosion in consumer choice. In like manner, in recent years we have been witnessing the acceleration of the

impact of modernity. The key feature of modernity entails the expansion of choice—the freedom to choose, and the sometimes disconcerting necessity to choose, once all the givens of the past have been swept away (Berger, 1979). The absence of rules and social conventions, seen at first blush as a sign of freedom, puts heavy burdens and stress on the individual who needs to make choices that were unavailable to the previous generation (Fromm, 1971).

More than ever before, Jews in contemporary North America are free to choose whether to be Jewish, and if so, how, when, where, and how much to be Jewish. Indeed, one major Jewish denomination—the Reform movement—makes choice the centerpiece of its theology. The Jewish movement from fate to choice usually has been portrayed by social historians as tied to the transition from traditional to modern society, or the experience of the Enlightenment and the encounter with Emancipation (Katz, 1971). But the expansion of choice neither starts nor stops with these truly momentous developments in Jewish history. Choice continues to broaden in our own lifetimes. As recently as the mid-sixties we could presume that Jews had to be Jewish and that there were certain things a Jew had to do and ought to know. The last 10 to 20 years have underscored the freedom of the individual Jew to opt out of both the formal and informal Jewish community. Jews no longer have to marry, make friends, have neighbors, or maintain organized affiliations with other Jews. The Jewish individual has gained ascendancy over the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community. Educators now speak of learner-centered, rather than text-centered, Jewish education. Donor-directed giving is yet another response to the expansion of choice and the modern rise of autonomy.

Reengineering analysts point to consumers' increasing sophistication and their greater demands. In like fashion, several recent studies of Americans' religious affiliation have described them as treating their churches and other religious institutions as consumer products. So long as their religious communities provide them with the services they seek, the adherents remain committed. When the communities fail them, when the institutions fail to produce the benefits their members seek, they move elsewhere, either to other local churches of the same denomination or to other religious movements altogether (Bellah et al., 1985).

North American Jews have become sophisticated and demanding consumers of community services, whereby becoming less automatically connected to the Jewish community. Their allegiance (or what we may call their religious "brand" loyalty) can no longer be taken for granted. One of the more curious findings of the National Jewish Population Survey (Kosmin et al., 1991) is that in reinterviews three years later, a good number of respondents and their spouses had switched their religion in the interim period, a finding with parallels in research on other American religious and ethnic identities.

The reengineering theorists point to market segmentation and the consequent necessity for more differentiated products, serving narrower slices of the market in a more highly tailored fashion. Here too we find a parallel with the contemporary Jewish condition. Modernity (and what we may call the last few

decades of supermodernity) has meant increasing individuation and differentiation. With the rapid geographic mobility experienced over the lifecourse and the diversity in denominations if not in other features as well, we can no longer presume as having as many similarities in life experiences. Jews, particularly outside of Orthodoxy, find themselves thrown together in synagogues, centers, schools, federations, and human-service agencies with Jews who, in some ways, are very much unlike them. We encounter more highly idiosyncratic Jewish biographies, generating a more culturally diverse population with respect to Jewish interests, tastes, and commitments.

Modernity delegitimizes the past, and that process has also proceeded apace in recent years. Traditional Judaism, and the premodern world in general, presumed the wisdom of ancient thinkers and the authority of the words they spoke and texts they wrote. With today's rapidly changing environment, the "new-and-improved" takes precedence over the "tried-and-true." No longer do we automatically presume the authority of the past or its usefulness for the present.

The multiplication of choices witnessed in the general marketplace has a special parallel among American Jews (and with some modification, among Canadian Jews as well). For the Jews, America—and especially post-sixties America—has meant new opportunities for advancement and acceptance. With this development comes less of a need to turn as clients to Jewish agencies for services, or as members to community, or as leaders for status. Jews are the most highly educated Americans (Goldstein, 1992), with all the implications of liberal education for traditional beliefs. They have the most opportunities to express themselves outside their religious and ethnic communities. Scholars of religion have noted that, in general, it is the more subordinated—the blacks, the women, the poor, and the least educated—those with fewer alternative social outlets, who are the most religiously active and most philanthropically generous in relative terms (Iannacone, 1994). The extraordinary success of individual Jews makes them less needy of the Jewish community and its institutions. In a way, Judaism and the Jewish community would be better off if Jews were less successful and as a result, had fewer attractive options outside the Jewish community. Moreover, they are the most highly entrepreneurial, by far, of any religioethnic group in the United States (Goldstein, 1992). Their highly professionalized, entrepreneurial backgrounds clash with the governance cultures of most Jewish organizations that seem more structured towards building consensus rather than drawing upon this highly independent entrepreneurial talent.

Recent research among mainstream American Jews finds experiences and attitudes toward organized Jewry that mirror those found among some consumers with respect to some corporations or industries. Individual Jews—even many who are active in Jewish life at home or the community—find formal Jewish organizations out of touch, remote, and even distasteful (Cohen & Eisen, in press). Many, perhaps most, have no satisfying personal relationship with an official representative of organized Jewry.

The last key change of which we need to be aware is that during the middle and latter part of this century, the organized Jewish community has managed to achieve many of its key objectives: it has adapted large immigrant populations to Canadian and American societies; it helped end nearly all forms of anti-Semitic discrimination; it advanced recognition of the Holocaust; and it secured broad political support for endangered Jewry, be it in Israel, the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, or Syria (Chanes, 1995; Goldberg, 1996). The old challenges of relief and rescue, of opening the United States and Canada to Jewish immigration, and of combating anti-Semitism and other threats to Jewish life and livelihood are, thankfully, largely behind us—but so too are some of the most compelling reasons to be active in organized Jewish life.

The result of all these and other crucial developments is a variety of unhealthy outcomes: stagnant centralized-philanthropic campaigns; the aging and numerical decline of most long-established membership organizations; widespread resistance to affiliation; alienation; under-utilized buildings; disheartened professionals and lay leaders; petty lay-professional conflict; and interinstitutional rivalry of the unproductive sort. Perhaps worst of all, we find the devaluation of Judaism occasioned by the lowering of standards in a vain attempt to entice more Jews into our institutions for lower cultural costs and obligations.

The troubles in what we may call the “public sphere” of North American Judaism are all the more significant when seen in contrast with the relative health of the Jewish private sphere. The public sphere consists of federations, major organizations, attachment to Israel, political involvements, and other related phenomena. The private sphere refers to spiritual concerns, education, culture, ritual practice, and such matters. Against the difficulties in the public sphere, we have relatively good news in the private sphere: synagogue attendance and ritual performance have held steady; day-school enrollments are way up, and climbing, as are the proportions who have enrolled in university-level Jewish-studies courses; book-publishing, including religious texts, scholarly tracts, and popular works on Judaism seems to have reached new heights both in number of titles and quantity of sales. What’s more, we seem to be in the midst of a particularly productive period for Jewish spirituality and Jewish learning. In broad terms, American Judaism may be becoming more religious and less ethnic, more individualist and less collectivist, more spiritual and less tribal.

## **REENGINEERING THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY**

The emerging weaknesses in the public sphere demand attention. The reengineering perspective offers a way of thinking, a critical stance, and a license for imagination that may prove useful in generating new ways of organizing the Jewish community. The early stages of redesigning the corporation, Hammer (1996) writes, demand “imagination, inductive thinking, and a touch of craziness. In redesigning processes, the reengineering team abandons the familiar and

seeks the outrageous.” In this spirit I offer a few half-baked ideas that have benefited from conversations with a small number of friends, colleagues, and close family members.

Let us begin with ideas applicable to individual agencies—synagogues, schools, centers, etc.—and then move on to the local Jewish community as a system worthy of reengineering.

**1. The Primary Liaison.** An agency staff member or a volunteer, veteran lay-person would be designated as the principal, ongoing contact for newly arrived families or individuals with the given agency. Thus, upon joining a synagogue or center or enrolling one’s child in a day school, one would be assigned a liaison or what some companies would call an “account executive.” His or her responsibilities would be to orient and introduce the newcomer to the agency and other member-families, to provide an ongoing source of information, and at times to mediate the disputes and misunderstandings that inevitably crop up in agency-member relations.

But more than these narrow, institutionally related responsibilities, the liaison—who figures to be fairly knowledgeable and well-connected, certainly in comparison with the newcomer—would tend to the newcomers’ wide spectrum of Jewish needs. Liaisons would advise families on the availability of alternative services in the entire community; they would serve as advocates of Jewish growth and learning; they would handle such delicate interactions as day-school or summer-camp scholarship applications; and—in the context of the ongoing relationship—attend to fundraising.

Not only would such a system give newcomers and relative outsiders a friendly connection with the Jewish community, it would also elevate the seriousness, knowledge, and commitment of the liaisons. In a sense, this idea builds upon Rabbi Harold Schulweis’ innovation of the para-rabbi, as well as the Shalom committees found in many smaller communities. But unlike the para-rabbi, this role is meant for synagogues and other agencies alike; and unlike the Shalom committees, this idea is meant as an enduring relationship.

**2. Team Case Management.** One of the more amusing recurring scenes in the television series *LA Law* was the firm’s staff meeting where attorneys were brought up-to-date on each other’s cases. Looking past the entertainment value, we may find a lesson here for synagogues, centers, and perhaps other agencies as well. Such agencies can adopt what is standard practice in geriatric and many health-care facilities, and regularly review entire families at meetings of several agency professionals. The rabbi could sit with the educational director, the office manager, and the cantor, or the physical education director could sit with the preschool director and the adult education director and discuss a sampling of the agency’s members in a weekly session. The implications for a better-informed staff and more personalized and thoughtful service are obvious.

**3. Broad-Banding Professional Responsibilities and Skills.** If professionals are to deal with the whole person and not just the part that relates to their particular program, if they are to effect more personalized relationships with their clientele or members, if they are to work closely with professionals from other departments and other professional backgrounds, and if they are to adapt to the rapid pace of change, they will need to acquire and utilize a wide range of professional skills. It is no accident that social workers in Jewish agencies are now increasing their Judaica background, while rabbis are learning more about community organization and case-work skills. Some of the cross-disciplinary training will occur organically, through cross-disciplinary case management, and some will be sponsored by organizations such as the JCSA. However undertaken, programs of in-service training can (and do) address gaps in professional skills outside one's original area of training.

Beyond reengineering the individual agency, we could also imagine advances inspired by the reengineering perspective on the community level. Here we are talking about processes that cut across synagogues, schools, centers, federations, and human-service agencies. On one level, these are all departments of the larger entity known as the local Jewish community. On another level, these are competing corporations in the same industry. One would hardly expect Taco Bell to reengineer with McDonald's to make sure that more North Americans "affiliate" with fast food. Yet even in the competitive world of the local Jewish agencies one can imagine eventually instituting innovations that make operations cheaper and more efficient, and the community more personalized and more responsive to the needs and interests of its individual members. It is in this spirit that I offer the following ideas.

**4. Centralized Billing and the Integrated Community Database.** Consistent with reengineering's emphasis on simplification and use of new technology, the community would maintain a single database, bringing together all basic information and accounting under one roof. Families will pay one billing office for all Jewish community services and donations. The centralization of billing should allow for the reduction of the labor costs resulting from individual institutions presently implementing their own book-keeping and billing procedures. The system also allows for innovative billing practices and financial management: the use of credit cards; standing orders to place payments on a monthly basis; the management of sizable community assets by taking advantage of cash-flow opportunities; the ability to market lists to direct-mail companies, and to market Jewish products to the list's enrollees.

But the information technology ought not to stop with financial management. We ought to be able to make use of new technological capabilities to collect, store, and make accessible a wide variety of appropriate information on Jewish families in the community. A community database on each Jewish family, complete with all appropriate information on its relationships with the Jewish community, can facilitate its ongoing attachment to the community. It would also



allow professionals an opportunity to scan the entire family and its numerous relationships with local Jewish agencies.

Ideally, a call that came to a preschool director from a certain home or business telephone number would cause the family's summary data to appear on his or her PC monitor as she spoke. The director would immediately have access to all family-members' names, their ties to the center, synagogue, day school, camps, and other agencies, as well as other pieces of relevant information.

**5. Interagency Cooperation and Communication.** Parallel to the team approach emergent from several reengineering efforts, front-line service agencies (synagogues, schools, centers, and, at times, human services) need to become more seamless, share more information, effect smoother hand-offs. Somehow we need to increase the likelihood that the center's preschool teacher will advocate the Jewish day school, or that the supplementary-school principal will advertise the center's camp, and that all agency professionals, including synagogue rabbis, will have a direct interest in a successful federation campaign.

**6. Joint Facilities.** Reengineers (and management experts generally) look at stored inventory as a sign of something amiss and as a place to economize through greater efficiency. Ideally, at any point in time, only small fractions of goods or capital facilities should be idle. Over the course of the week or the calendar year, an audit of most Jewish communities' buildings would find many of them empty at different times. The opportunities for more efficient utilization of the entire capital infrastructure are apparent when we realize that "down-times" are often complementary. Centers are empty on holidays, but that's when synagogues are heavily utilized. Day-school classrooms are vacant when supplementary schools are in session. These kinds of patterns allow for joint utilization of capital facilities and, obviously, joint planning as well.

**7. Federation as a Headquarters Institution.** For almost twenty years federations have experienced a kind of organizational gridlock, a development so disturbing and obvious that federation leaders have increasingly been discussing such steps as shedding some current responsibilities, acquiring new ones, and redesigning still others. Their freedom to maneuver is in decline along with their resources as money, leadership, and ideas flow elsewhere.

The long-held notion of a single federation campaign supplanting fundraising by individual agencies is an ideal that has long since passed. For years, agencies in some communities have been running their own fundraising drives, and for years, federations in many communities have been unable to provide meaningful funding for some major agencies. It may be time to sanction agency fundraising in some organized and orderly fashion.

I propose that federations increasingly emphasize their "headquarters functions." These are the responsibilities that cut across functional agencies, such as the management of information, lay- and professional-personnel recruitment

and training, the distribution of direct subsidies for Jewish community services, centralized purchasing, communal planning, etc. In other words, federations would assume prime responsibility for managing the infrastructure of Jewish communal life.

**8. Harnessing Jewish Entrepreneurial Abilities.** Earlier I discussed the clash between the entrepreneurial talents and inclinations of successful North American Jews and the consensual, committee-based style of governance of most of our institutions. We need a fundamental revolution in the way we make decisions, one that will free lay leaders with a highly individualist bent to make significant, creative contributions, yet at the same time not destroy the community process. One possibility is that potential funders, provided that their aims are consonant with those of the Jewish community and contingent on their commitment to maintain a serious gift to the overall campaign, could have the opportunity to “purchase” staff assistance and professional expertise to help them design their own philanthropic contribution to the community. In short, the funders—with federation approval, encouragement, assistance, and influence—would run their own planning processes. In such a world, federations’ products for sale would include their technical expertise and experience with the community and its needs.

The specific ideas offered are both flawed and unrefined. They are not meant to be seen as finished proposals ready to be accepted or rejected, but to illustrate the sorts of thinking that can emerge. The one clear implication of the reengineering literature is that in many communities, key stakeholders and influential leaders, both lay and professional, from diverse institutional backgrounds ought to sit together and accept the challenge of thinking about designing the Jewish community from scratch. They may well come up with exciting structural alternatives to make the Jewish community more efficient, more effective, and more accomplished.

## CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the value of treating Jewish life as a product to be marketed to the Jewish consumer, we also need to bear in mind that the excessive adoption of this approach ultimately undermines the very endeavor we seek to enrich. Specifically, by catering too closely to the Jewish consumer, a policy that is not all that far from abandoning traditional norms and historic demands to make Jewish participation easier, we run the risk of demeaning the Jewish communal enterprise in its entirety. According to much of the research literature, since the early 1970s the most successful communities, those with the highest rates of growth and the most committed adherents, have been the ones that have made relatively high demands of their members, although not so high as to devolve into closed and zealous sects rather than open and vibrant churches. Applying rational economic principles, one sociologist argues that lowering the price of participation in religious communities—be it a moral or a financial

price—demoralizes and demobilizes the most committed. If such is the price of following the consumer, then the price is too high. Especially for a numerically small, minority religious community, it is the presence or absence of the most dedicated that in the long run will make or break the successful Jewish community and its agencies.

As we are seeking to make the community more attuned to the needs of the ever-changing Jewish-consumer marketplace, let us also recall the specific features of a religious community in general and of Judaism in particular that set it apart from other goods and services in modern North America. For ultimately, this is a “business” whose bottom line is measured by a “higher authority.”

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